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January 17, 1883.

Vol. IX.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 234.

OLD ROCKY'S "BOYEES;" BENITO, THE YOUNG HORSE-BREAKER.

A Romance of Adventure in the "Lone Star State."

BY MAJOR SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."



THEY SAW BENITO, COOL AND UNHARMED, DARTING AWAY TOWARD THE SHORE, SEATED ASTRIDE THE BACK OF THE ALLIGATOR.

Old Rocky's "Boyees;"

OR,

Benito, the Young Horse-Breaker.

A Romance of Adventure in the
"Lone Star State."BY MAJOR SAM S. HALL,
("Buckskin Sam.")

CHAPTER I.

FOUR ADVENTURES AND A MULE.

AFTER pouring down its almost stifling heat all day long, from a cloudless, brazen sky, the Southern sun was slowly sinking.

Its blood-red disk, like a huge ball of fire, appeared to rest upon the far-off line of horizon in the west, and shot arrows of gold through the branches of the stately, towering trees, and amid the long, waving festoons of Spanish moss, which hung like funeral veils from every limb, drooping over the laughing, gliding waters of the San Antonio river.

The dark, gray adobe walls of Mission San Juan, stained and worn by the storms of a century, loomed up amid the mesquites, a pistol-shot from the river; its front, dome, and ruined dormitories gilded by the warm good-by of the god of day.

Straight across from the Mission, on the east bank of the river, almost entirely shielded from observation, stood a youth just verging on manhood. He leaned against the trunk of a huge pecan tree, with his arms folded, and his eyes resting upon the beautiful shimmering stream, whose wavelets seemed molten gold.

He was not over eighteen years of age, of medium height, and rather slender in build, though, as from time to time he nervously changed his position his movements indicated strength as well as grace.

He wore a green plaid shirt, with wide, open collar, broad-brimmed, soft sombrero, one side looped up by a silver star; and leggins that were thrust into the tops of cavalry boots. In the way of arms his outfit consisted of a pair of Colt's largest six-shooters, a bowie-knife, and a Sharp's carbine, the latter leaning against the tree-trunk at his side, within easy reach. The ends of the belt that held his knife and pistols were connected by a huge silver clasp, richly chased, and having engraved in its center "Benito, El Bocarro."

Well known was this youth, from Boca Chico to Santa Fe, and north to the head-waters of the Canadian. Born in the Alamo city, his father being an American, and his mother a Mexican, he led a wandering, unfettered life; sometimes breaking wild mustangs, sometimes acting as a guide or scout to some wagon-train, and again striking out alone through chaparral or plain.

Benito was brave, and fearless even to recklessness, and, strange to say, repudiated utterly everything Mexican. A stray word in the Mexican tongue, a trick now and then of their ways in camp, these he had in common with all Texans; but otherwise he seemed to strive to be American in act, deed and word, like to his father.

If by so doing he seemed to despise his mother's race, they returned that scorn with hatred, intense and deadly, and more than once while in San Antonio had his life been in deadly peril.

Now, at sunset he stood by the riverside, and the hundreds of spotted turtles on moss-lined rocks and logs that raised above the surface of the dashing water, all with heads stretched from out their hard shells, and their bead-like eyes turned toward the setting sun, showed by their listless manner that for a long time he had made no motion nor noise to disturb them. And near to him, with their snake-like tails coiled each to a limb of a tree, and their heads hanging downward, were many cunning opossums, while many a 'coon from his favorite nest in the crotch of a tree stretched and gaped almost human-like, its day nap over. The sleepy owl winked and blinked defiantly at the fast-disappearing sun, knowing that the reign of the day-god would soon be over.

Away down the river, through a long vista of hanging moss, drooping branch and vine, was a clear, deep pool, smooth as a mirror, and to this a slight splash in the water drew his attention.

His eyes brightened and a gratified expression rested upon his features, for, elevated at least ten inches above the surface of the water, was the long, snake-like head and neck of a soft-shelled turtle, that greatest delicacy with the bordermen of the South-west.

But Benito's quick eye also caught sight of a huge moccasin snake in a line with the turtle, but beyond it, upon the opposite bank of the stream. Its head was gyrating rapidly from the apex of its coil, its mouth was wide open, and a tiny bird was fluttering within its charmed circle, slowly nearing those terrible jaws.

It was but an instant that the head of the turtle was in a direct line with that of the deadly moccasin snake, far beyond, but in that instant Benito's Sharp's rifle was leveled, his quick eye glanced along the sights, and a loud report rung through the bottom timber, causing the draperies of hanging moss and leaves to quiver like aspens. Then the turtle was headless and struggling in the stream, the moccasin was writhing in the agonies of death, and the little bird was darting away on eager wings.

Quickly thrusting another cartridge into his rifle, Benito bounded from rock to rock, and soon secured the turtle. A few moments later, when the last golden rays of the sun had kissed the turrets of the old Mission, and the gloom of night had come on, he stood by a camp-fire he had just lighted and listened with a smile to the sounds of some one approaching. There was a swishing of branches and crackling of bushes as two young men, both Americans, came dashing toward the camp-fire.

The new arrivals were fine-looking young men, evidently fresh from the States, but dressed and armed exactly as was Benito; the blankets, tin cups, canteens and other camp gear lashed to the cantles of their saddles showing that they came prepared for camp life. Their names were Robert Sinclair and Henry Greenway, and they had been raised in comfortable homes in the far East, but having caught the frontier fever from cursory reading they had come to the conclusion to see for themselves what pleasures could be found in an adventurous life in the "Lone Star State."

"Bueno, senores!" exclaimed Benito, as he grasped the extended hands, which were eagerly placed in his. "You are late. I thought you had but few friends that would cause you to delay in San Antonio. I have been waiting here since the middle of the afternoon, and was almost on the point of riding in in search of you. If I had I suppose we should have remained there all night, for the señoritas of the fandango dance late and I never miss a *danza* at Dona Candelario's when I am in town."

"I am very glad, then, that you did not come," returned Sinclair, as he sprung lightly to the ground. "We want to start early in the morning. We were delayed by the gunsmith, Jacob Lynn, who had neglected to put swivels and straps on our rifles. But what the dickens have you over the fire? It smells delicious; and our ride has given us an appetite dangerous to the commissary of a whole army."

"When you taste some soup," responded Benito, "perhaps you will know what it is made from, but I doubt it. Unsaddle and water your mustangs, and by that time the supper will be ready."

"The young men obeyed readily enough and when they returned they found Benito had taken their tin cups from their saddles and filled them with steaming soup, while spread upon green leaves were several roasted fox squirrels and corn cakes done a golden brown, while through the camp spread the aroma of coffee.

"Where is 'Old Rocky'?" inquired Benito as, with perspiring face all aglow with the heat, he pushed the coffee-pot off the coals with a stick. "I expected he would come with you."

"He did start with us from the plaza," answered Bob, "but the pack-mule is an ugly, balky brute, and I reckon he has a hard time getting along with it. We will not hurry about breaking our fast for he must be as hungry as a wolf yelling at that mule, and we want to take no advantage of each other on this trip. Green, let us—"

He did not finish the sentence for he was interrupted by a yell that would have done honor to a Comanche brave, and at the same time tearing and crashing through the underbrush at fearful speed came the pack-mule, heading directly toward the camp-fire. There was danger on foot for the supper.

But Benito realized that danger, and springing toward the mule, he raised the walnut club with which he had been stirring the fire and struck it a violent blow just behind the ears, bringing the animal to the earth as though it had been shot through the brain.

"Why, Benito, you've killed the mule; and I paid twenty dollars for him yesterday."

Bob spoke with some feeling. He regretted the loss of the animal, and had no mind for a mule-hunt on the morrow.

"Don't fret! I only struck him on the muscles of the neck, and for the moment he is paralyzed. You've heard of creasing mustangs by shooting them below the root of the mane?"

"Certainly."

"Well, knocking them down with a club produces the same result, if you don't strike too hard. That mule will be as bright and lively as ever in a moment. You had better unpack before he comes back to himself and mischief."

Another wild yell rung through the bottom timber, there was another crashing of brush, and a rough, hoarse voice reached their ears:

"Shoot that doggoned mule's ears offen his head! Gimme a chance to chaw the corner o' his left hind huff off! Ampurtate his lip an' skin his eyeball! May I be chawed inter hash by an alligator-gar ef I'd 'sociate with ther kay-tankerous cuss ag'in. Benito! Diablo Buckaro! I'll gi'n yer four bits to straddle the imp o' Satan an' ride ther devilment outen him!"

But "Old Rocky," for he it was, suddenly changed his tune, as his horse broke through the branches and he came in view of the camp.

"Waal, may I be skulped by a Piute squaw! I didn't 'low you'd take me at my word an' lay ther contrary critter out cold at wonst. What are we 'uns goin' ter do fur an animile ter tote ther camp outfit 'long ther trail?"

As he looked somewhat regretfully at the seemingly defunct animal the mule suddenly recovered, and, with a snort and plunge, threw the saddle and kilt clean off of his back, the girth having been unbuckled by Bob.

Greenway, thinking himself in the safest place, stood watching the proceedings from behind the mule, which, as the pack slipped over its tail, gave a terrible kick with both hind feet, knocking pack and saddle against Greenway's breast, overthrowing him, and literally covering him with flour from a sack that burst.

At this all hands, except Benito, roared with laughter. The horse-breaker, knowing the tricks of the animal, quietly slipped a half-loop about the under jaw of the mule, and by a quick movement ran around a sapling with the lariat, while Old Rocky sprung from his horse, and picking up the club, vented his feelings by a few sound whacks upon the hind-quarters of the animal, which, springing away from him, was drawn up to the sapling by Benito and there secured.

By this time Greenway had picked himself up, with a woe-begone visage at first, which gradually brightened as he realized how comically he really looked, and that he was not at all injured. While he brushed himself off Old Rocky stripped his horse of his accouterments and staked him out with the others. Then all congregated about the fire.

Old Rocky, the Scout, really deserves more than a passing mention.

He was short in stature, of iron nerves and sinews, a man known from the Gulf of Mexico to the Rocky Mountains. So many years had he passed in the latter region, and so many stories had he to tell of that rugged range that he got to be known rather as "Old Rocky" than as William Young, the name by which he had been called when residing in Victoria, Texas.

An old, greasy, slouched sombrero partly covered his gray hair; bright twinkling eyes looked out above a beard that matched well his hair, and left but a small portion of his face visible; a blue, woolen shirt was tucked into buckskin leggins that were tangled and torn with chaparral traveling and they in turn were stuffed into the tops of his long-legged boots, while about his neck was knotted a large blue and red cotton handkerchief the ends of which hung loose behind his back.

Add to this a huge bowie-knife, an army revolver and a long-barreled, muzzle-loading rifle, and gaunt gray mustang, more noted for endurance than beauty, and you have the man and his outfit, clear through.

Drawing his bowie, and throwing his sombrero on the sward, he seated himself with the rest, with a grunt of relief.

"Pare me down inter a Piute pappoose ef I ain't az hungry az a no'thern b'ar in spring-time. Ther mule gi'n me a hefty ole rifle to make, an' I'm ready now fer sumthin' ter chaw. I'm feeble, an' needs nussin' up. I tell yer ef ye'd hitch that mule to a genewine Gospel Sharp fur a day, I'd bet a slug ag'in a pickayune he'd turn a wuss pirat' then Cap Kidd ever war."

Probably Benito's supper offered some consolation for his late trials since he joined with the

rest in making a hearty meal, after which Old Rocky filled and lit his pipe, and Benito made some cigarettes with corn-shuck wrappers for himself and the boys. As the smoke rolled up the conversation began:

"Boys," said Old Rocky, "we haz glided ter-gether az pards fur sum consid'r'ble period, an' we calkerlates on havin' sum lively times in ther futur'. Bob an' Green, yere, wants ter see perrary life, an' Benito an' this ole coon air goin' to give yer a show that-a-ways. We all starts fur ther Bravo with ther ljee o' fun ahead, an' sumthin' what'll be rough fun at ther best. All I haz ter say ar', keep yer peepers on either this ole coon er Benito, er yer mout lose yer ha'r an' cum ter buzzard feed, er kiote lunch afer ther fuzz sprouts fa'r on yer lip."

The two youngsters seemed inclined to put in a few words, but Old Rocky held up his hand, and continued:

"Ter make things run smooth on ther trail I reckon Green kin look out fur wood an' tend ter ther coffee-pot, soon's we-uns make a camp. Bob kin freeze ter ther pack-mule, an' tend ter cookin' tricks soon ez Benito haz took sum o' ther cussedness outen ther gotch-eared kicker. I shell hev as much ov a job on my paws as I kin 'tend to, I reckon, ter shoot game enuff fur this healthy outfit, an' along o' Benito keep a look-out fur reds an' Greazers."

"Fact ar', boys, we don't know what's ahead, an' can't count on nothin' on ther perrary, so we better glide under our blankits now an' git up an' git airly to-morrow. Ain't thet plum', double barrel, self-cookin', back actin', four-hoss sense? Eh, Benito?"

As the old scout concluded he spread his blanket under the pecan tree, and threw down his saddle for a pillow.

"Si, senior," answered the horse-breaker, as he followed his example.

"Bueno noche, senores, bueno noche, Senior Rocky."

"Good-night!" chorused the boys, and as, on account of the proximity of the Alamo city, no guard seemed necessary, the occupants of the camp were soon all buried in profound slumber.

CHAPTER II.

BREAKING IN THE GREENHORNS.

LONG before old Sol had kissed the prairie flowers the crack of Benito's rifle rung through the river bottom, and a fat coon fell from the high pecan directly upon the feet of Greenway, who was fast asleep.

The report caused both boys to spring upright on their blankets, but half awakened; and the fall of the coon, crashing through the branches and striking upon his feet, made Green yell, and bound quickly toward the river. Before he could comprehend what had happened or where he was he had run squarely against the mule, which plunged, squealed and snorted in a terrified manner, and Green barely escaped receiving a broadside from the animal's flying heels. Still frightened and bewildered the youth sprung in another direction, just as a roar of laughter burst on his ears and he found himself close hugged in the arms of Old Rocky.

When he found just what had happened Green was disgusted enough with himself, but Old Rocky soothed the feelings that had been hurt by the general laugh, and by the time the morning ablutions had been performed and the savory odor of the breakfast saluted his nostrils he was again in a good-humor.

When the meal had been finished Old Rocky rose from the sward and turned toward the mule.

"Benito, I reckons ther time ar' come ter take sum o' ther pure, nat'ral born cussedness outen thet gotch-eared, double-barreled kicker."

As he spoke he loosened the rope, while the boys stood ready with clubs to prevent the mule from rushing back into camp.

Benito, with quick movements, drew on his bridle over the rope and thrust the powerful jaw-breaking Spanish bit into the animal's mouth, which, regardless of its kicking and tearing about, he was ready to mount. At his wrist, secured by a buckskin loop, hung a long quirt, and this from time to time he used, as, assisted by the united yells and pounding of the whole party, his muleship was dragged and pushed through the bottom eastward, to the prairie, where only a few scattering mesquites could interfere with the intended proceedings.

Grasping the rope and taking the reins in his left hand, the same hand resting on the horn of the saddle, his right hand grasping firmly the further side of the cantle, Benito sprung astride with a yell, and the old scout, who had with both hands gripped the snorting animal's nose, bounded to one side.

As Old Rocky leaped aside the vicious mule,

trembling in every limb, sunk down until its belly touched the prairie sod. Then, with one wild bound straight into the air the animal came down with terrific force upon all four hoofs at once. The next instant Benito was elevated on the apex of a pyramid of mule. Then, quick as thought, speeding away like an arrow from a bow mule and rider shot over the prairie, the quirt of Benito cutting about the animal's hams at every bound.

"Talk 'bout yer circuss-ridin', boys!" broke out Old Rocky. "Tain't nowhar. I know'd he'd make his contanker'us carkiss hum lively, fur no human's straddled him fur six month! I'll bet a bufler bull ag'in' a sick kiote thet them fellers that sold him ter yer hed ter knock him down ter git ther pack-saddle an' kraik onter him. Jewhitaker slamups! but he'll comb the lad's ha'r wi' mesquite thorns ef he don't 'tend ter biz!"

The last remark of the old scout was occasioned by seeing the mule make directly towards a mesquite motte, evidently with the intention of brushing the hated burden from his back. To the observers it seemed very likely that the brute would accomplish its object.

But Benito was not to be beaten by a mule. He drew on the powerful bit until the animal's head was brought around against his own thigh; though even then, as they went past, the hind-quarters of the mule brushed against the thorny branches.

By this time half a mile had been passed at breakneck speed, and the horse-tamer, keeping the same pull on the bridle, gradually veered around, until they faced the starting-point. Then, slacking rein and rope, with a wild yell he applied his quirt without mercy, and galloped back past his watching friends into the bottom timber, the mule reeking with sweat and obeying the slightest touch on the bridle-rein.

"Yer see," said Rocky, as he and the boys returned through the bottom, "thet mule hed a tuff break onst afore but hed kinder furgot ther partic'lars. Howsumdever they haz cum back ter his 'membrance, an' he's made up his mind now thet he can't be ther Guv'nor o' ther State, ner even boss this yere outfit. He'll be do-sile, I reckon, fur ther futur', but yer can't gamble on nary mule in ther country. They'll 'pear az meek an' humble az ther boss ov'r Sunday skule one minnit, an' ther next kick yer kidneys clean outen yer, an' by ther time yer pick yerself up an' count ther pieces ther danged critter 'll be feedin' az innercent, an' look az harmless, az a cotton-tail rabbit."

The explanation of the disposition of mules in general ended as they reached the camp, and then to their surprise the boys found all the various cooking utensils and their stock of provisions packed upon the mule, the apron of the kyack buckled securely over all, and the brute hitched to a sapling, breathing heavily; and evidently well convinced that as long as it belonged to this party any expression of a difference of opinion would only prove disastrous to himself.

"Saddle up, senores!" yelled Benito, as he dashed after his mustang; and all hands followed.

In preparing for a day's march in the Southwest everything must have a place, and be in place.

If the loosely-woven corn-sack, which must in that country be placed next to the animal's skin, is put on wrinkled the horse will have a sore back before night. If a woolen saddle-blanket is thrown on next the hide the horse will have a scalded back, the hair will come off, and the animal be spoiled for saddle service for some time. Consequently "saddling up" is a matter of great importance in a hot climate. It would be impossible to use in the South padded saddles, such as are used in the North. A Mexican tree brings the weight more on the ribs of the animal, and leaves the backbone almost free from pressure.

Every Mexican saddle is provided with long, buckskin strings, four pairs on the cantle and one pair at the base of the horn, besides the loop which holds the stake rope to the horn, from which it can be slipped in an instant. The blankets are rolled compactly and bound fast to the cantle, the same strings holding the canteen and tin cup. In addition, a pair of malettos or saddle-bags, are generally used, to take extra clothing, medicine, ammunition and the like, which rest upon a "sweat-leather," that reaches back from the cantle. A piece of leather four inches wide and a foot long, with a hole in either end, is used as a gun-holder, one end being slipped over the horn, the gun placed in position, the holder drawn about the barrel and the other end of the holder secured over

the horn. The breech of the gun being to the right is easily grasped, and in fact serves as a rest to the right hand while riding. The muzzle by a slight pressure can be depressed or elevated, or directed right or left with such accuracy that, riding at full speed, a practiced hand can kill a buffalo every shot without taking the gun from the holder.

Having saddled his own animal Benito had taken the time to instruct Bob and Green on such points as these, and in five minutes from the time the command to saddle up was given, the four were mounted, and Benito and old Rocky were watering their horses at the ford below.

Soon after Bob made his appearance, followed by Greenway. In fact the latter followed far too closely, as the branches thrust aside by the former swished back into his face. As his animal sprung clear of the bottom timber he was seen by Benito and Old Rocky to have his hands thrust out before him to ward off the blows and both eyes closed.

"That'll never do, Green," broke out Rocky in a stern voice.

"Yer'll hav' yer han's full o' somethin' wuss ner brush afore long. Yer'll hav' ter larn ter keep one hand on yer bridle an' t'other on yer gun, an' not ride so close to none o' ther party. Ef brush are in ther way lean forrards an' skin under slick an' clean, all ther time keepin' yer peepers at steady bizz, an' not 'low 'em to throw off on yer ther leastest. I wants yer ter understand, an' I ain't 'tendin' ter hurt yer feelin's, but are spittin' it out fur yer futur' benefit, thet we-uns don't run an express, an' yer can't chalk C. O. D. on yer back an' git checked through on this line 'thout any trouble on yer own side. I b'l'eves yer chock full an' b'ilin' over wi' grit arter you git woke up, but yer don't want ter be cotched a-nappin' when we allows to meander."

"Thank you, Rocky," answered Green, without showing he was in the least offended. "I know I need advice, and if you will give it I will take it. In a day or two I trust I shall act to suit you better."

"We have forgotten something!" suddenly interrupted Bob. There had been no interruption in their march, and their dripping horses were now standing on the opposite side of the river.

"Caspita!" exclaimed Benito. "What is it? Your malettos?"

"Why, no, it is the pack-mule," answered Bob, with rather an important air.

Much to the surprise of the boys the information was greeted with a roar of laughter from the two experienced hands, and the old scout, as he started his animal, leaned back, turning on the greenhorns what was intended for a pitying smile.

"Never yer mind thet mule. Yer'll see the gotch-eared gallampshus huff-shooter cum b'ilin' along like a blue streak o' Mexican lightnin' in just three shakes av a Rocky Mountain goat's crupper-holder. Ye'll l'arn somethin' fresh 'gards a mule every day. They're an animul what hates tharsel's so bad they won't stop alone no ways, an'll take a bayou alligator fur a pard afore they'll play a lone hand. Jist lissen. What'd I tell yer?"

As Rocky concluded, the prolonged squeal of the mule rung through the bottom, followed by a crashing of brush, and soon the animal appeared, coming with an awkward lope from the woods, its pack wabbling this way and that as it dashed into the ford, drank hastily, and then came trotting along behind the cavalcade.

It is useless to detail the trivial incidents occurring to our friends during their march to the Nueces river. In good time they made the trip through the stretch of mesquite country to the Medina, from there through the post-oak belt and prairie to the Rio Frio, and the long ride over the bold, rolling plains to Fort Ewell, on the Nueces, without adventure worthy of notice, though Bob and Green picked up a vast amount of prairie knowledge and every day saw things new and strange. To them camp life seemed both easy and pleasant, and the way had led through a section of country where there was no necessity for any great suffering from heat or thirst.

CHAPTER III.

PRAIRIE COOKERY—THE SPORT BEGINS.

THE two young adventurers and their body-guard camped on the margin of a small lake, about one mile from the Rio Nueces; and the first day after arriving there was a busy time.

Benito and Old Rocky, leaving Bob and Green on guard at camp, mounted and proceeded to the Saunders ranch, situated on the south bank of the river, where formerly the United States fort or station had stood; though Fort Ewell

was now like many another fort on the frontier, only such in name, having been abandoned so long before that no sign of its military occupancy remained.

Gladly were the two received by the Saunders boys, Pless and Bob—well known mustangers at that time—and a trade was soon made for a lot of raw hides, a mule, and a pack-saddle.

The raw hides were stretched on the ground and fastened in place by wooden pins, driven through the edges. Benito quickly set to work with a sharp knife to cut them into narrow strips, to be used as lariats or lassoes. He began by making a small, circular hole in the hide, and starting from this he cut round and round paring off a strip until the whole hide, except the narrow, worthless edge, formed one long narrow strip, with the hair on.

Several hides were cut, forming quite a load for the mule, and this work being done Benito and Old Rocky gave the Saunders boys a hearty good-by, and returned to camp.

There they found that the boys had not altogether wasted their time, since, in a bayou, adjoining the lake they had caught several catfish that would weigh from fifteen to twenty pounds apiece, and Bob was in a quandary for they were so large that he did not know how they were to be cooked.

Benito soon solved the question for him. He requested Bob to dig a hole a foot deep and two feet long and wide, and directed Greenway, as there were no stones, to gather some petrified wood, great quantities of which are found about the lakes near the Nueces. When this had been done, the horse-breaker filled the hole with dry mesquite wood, which was set on fire and allowed to burn out.

By that time the sides of the make-shift oven were heated, and Benito, placing two of the best fish in the hole, without breaking the skin, covered them with embers, and the sod that had been removed in digging.

"Now, senores," said Benito, as he finished his work, "we will make coffee and bake some corn-cakes, and by that time our fish will be ready."

Bob and Green had looked on in wonder, thinking the fish would be burned to a crisp, and not at all liking the idea of having them cooked without removing the entrails.

"I don't think I care for fish to-night, Benito," said Bob, rather ruefully. "I think I'll take my rifle and see if I can't knock over some squirrels, or other small game. Come on, Green."

"Bueno," answered the horse-tamer, with a laugh. "Go ahead, but don't stray far. As to the fish, we shall see about that when you return."

Greenway, delighted at the prospect of a stroll joined his friend, and the two started, with their rifles on their shoulders, striking into the timber which stood thick, all around the lake shore.

They found it difficult to make their way through the tangled vines, and over huge petrified logs and limbs, black as coal, which lay in every direction. Birds, strange to the northern boys in song and plumage, flew from branch to branch above them; and rank, luxurious reeds and strange plants grew on every side, many covered with most brilliant and beautiful flowers.

Separating some thirty yards the boys, with their rifles cocked and at a ready, proceeded toward the lake, in a timorous manner for they knew that panthers, bears, and even Indians were frequenters of the deep shades around them.

They had not advanced far when Bob was brought to a standstill by a wild yell of fright from his friend, and at the same time he heard a great crashing of bushes, as if some large animal was coming directly toward him. He recovered himself barely in time to spring behind a tree when a huge alligator rushed past, tearing down vines, and breaking the bushes in his course, its long tail whisking in all directions. From its actions Bob concluded that the alligator was as much frightened as himself, and knowing that, at the speed it was making, he could not hit the brute in any vulnerable part, he turned toward the point at which he expected to find Green.

Upon reaching the vicinity there lay his comrade's rifle, but Green himself was nowhere to be seen. Filled with fears Bob was about to give a signal yell when the well known voice of Green reached his ears, and looking up he saw Green seated upon the limb of a tree.

"Well, old boy!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing up there? Hunting birds' nests?"

"Not much," answered Green, recovering

from his fright at seeing Bob so unconcerned. "I'm hunting a young earthquake. I ran against the old one about where you stand. Have you seen a petrified log, about twelve feet long, playing circus down your way?"

Bob burst into a merry laugh as he comprehended the cause of his friend's late alarm.

"Yes; I saw a huge alligator, that I suppose you took for a log."

"You are right," responded Green, as he descended hand under hand by a hanging vine.

"I stepped directly on the monster, who must have been asleep. It did not take him long to wake up and go under me, and it did not take me many seconds to establish myself in that tree, although I do not know how it was done. I do not think I could climb it again in the same way—unless I had as urgent a call. But come on. We'll see what's next on the bill. The surprises and mishaps seem to be all reserved for me."

Once more advancing, the two soon reached the bottom of a gully, and, as they were climbing the opposite bank, the loud gobble of a turkey sounded just ahead.

Creeping on hands and knees the two climbed the ascent and peeped cautiously over the bank. To their joy they saw a huge gobbler strutting proudly around some half-dozen hen-turkeys. His wattles were red as blood, his wings rasping the ground as he stepped off to show his beautifully-blended blue and black feathers, his head thrown back and his chest thrust out.

The boys lay but for a moment to admire the, to them, novel and beautiful sight. Then slowly, without noise, their rifle barrels were thrust forward over the bank.

"Give me a whack at the gobbler, Green, and you knock spots out of a hen. All ready! One—two—three!"

Both rifles spoke together, and their mingled reports were followed by the loud flapping of wings.

Springing to their feet they saw that a hen-turkey was just giving its last kick, while the gobbler was dancing and rolling around at a great rate. Bob, who did not see that the head of the gobbler was only hanging by the skin, ran to knock the huge fowl over with his rifle, thinking he was but slightly wounded; but the cock-turkey, in the agonies of death, suddenly sprung against him with flapping wings, and with such force as to knock him flat on the ground. As he arose, laughing, the headless gobbler sunk dead at his feet.

Having reloaded, the boys tied the feet of their turkeys together and hung them over their rifles, shouldering their game, which they found to be as heavy a burden as they could comfortably carry.

As they were now near the lake, they decided to go on and take a look at the water.

They soon found themselves at the very verge of a jump-off, and the lake at their feet.

The sheet of water was not more than two hundred yards wide, but extended east and west as far as they could see, although that was not far, since the timber upon the tortuous bank soon shut off the view on either hand.

At first sight the whole surface of the water seemed to be spotted with stumps and drift-wood; but they soon saw, by sudden movements, that the apparently innocent objects were alligators. Hundreds and hundreds of the monsters were in sight, many of them of prodigious size, and the boys involuntarily stepped back as they made the discovery, shuddering lest they should slip over the bank and be devoured by the slimy, hideous things.

As instantly they returned, attracted by a disturbance in the water, and glanced directly below, to see what might be its nature.

Another surprise awaited them.

Just below, plainly shown by a glimmer of sunlight through the trees, was a huge fish, some eight feet in length, with a long bill extending from its head.

The fish was shaped like an immense pike, and Bob, who had never heard or read of a fish of the size and description in fresh water, looked narrowly at the stranger, determined to relate this discovery to Benito, and try to get the latter to assist in its capture.

It was with a shudder that the two boys gave a last look at the lake, and saw two bull alligators in fierce conflict, throwing the water high in the air, by thrashing their huge, powerful tails, every blow making a report as loud as the discharge of a gun.

A little before sun-down Bob and Green entered camp, perspiring freely under their heavy load, but very proud of their success. They were complimented by Benito and Old Rocky, the former, however, telling them that supper

was awaiting them, and that there was no time to cook turkey meat.

Somewhat disappointed at not being able to cook their game the two boys seated themselves by the side of the old scout and poured out their coffee, Benito coming from his novel oven bearing on a huge piece of bark the two catfish.

Great was the surprise of Bob and Green to see that the two fish laid before them were white as the driven snow; and to see Old Rocky, by a dexterous flip of his bowie draw great chunks away from the bones, ready for eating.

After seeing Benito sprinkle salt over the delicious looking morsels, the boys could not resist the temptation to taste; and having tasted to gorge; meantime expressing their surprise that a catfish could be served up in so neat and toothsome a manner.

"There is no better way to cook than in the way of the Montezumas," answered Benito. "A beef's head, a buffalo cow's udder, or buffalo tongues are delicious when cooked in a hole in the ground. All the juices and nutritious gases are retained."

After the evening meal was eaten, and the animals changed to fresh grass, all seated themselves in camp, to smoke, and tell over the incidents of the day.

Then Bob told of the remarkable fish that he had seen, and no sooner had he described its immense length than Benito became intensely interested, at the conclusion of the story bringing his hand down on his thigh in an excited manner exclaiming:

"Senores, can you go direct to the spot where you saw this fish?"

"I think—yes, I am sure I can," answered Bob. "Couldn't you, Green?"

"Why, certainly."

"Don't matter a danged bit whether they kin, or not," broke in Old Rocky. "We'd be purty spess'muns, o' scouts ef we c'u'dn't foller the trail. Yer seem ter hev fell in love with that fish, Benito. Ar' he an old pard o' yours?"

"You are just right, Senor Rocky. Twice before, when camped here, have I tried my best to sink a lasso over what, I am sure, was the same fish. It is the largest alligator gar I have ever seen or heard of. We must try and capture it to-morrow. The attempt will afford us some sport, and it will not interfere much with the braiding of our mustang snares."

"Good!" said Green. "I know it will be grand sport, and perhaps you can also rope an alligator, as you say you have often done. I would like to examine one closely."

"An' thar's a heap o' them same allygators," broke out the old scout, laughing, "what 'ud like 'mazingly ter 'zamine you clusly, too. They kin beat a dozen doctors in ther dysectin' bizz, and gi'n 'em an hour's start. I say, Green, why didn't yer 'zamin' thet one yer hed sich a de'd sure thing on 'while ago?"

"I hadn't time," answered Green, laughing. "I happened to take a great interest in astronomical matters about then, and went for an elevated position for observation on short notice."

"I couldn't make up my mind," here interposed Bob, "which was the most frightened, Green or the alligator. But before I forget it, here's a question I want to ask: I noticed large heaps of dry prickly pear sticks and bark in some of the mesquite mottes on the prairie to-day, and wish to know what kind of an animal builds and lives in them. Some of the heaps were three feet high."

"Those are constructed by the small cotton-tail rabbit," answered Benito. "If you were to go near them now, after the dew has fallen, you could kill plenty with a club. They are seldom seen by day."

"Yes; an' ther perrarie rats lives in 'em," added Old Rocky, "an' snakes."

"Just as larger rabbits, small owls and rattlesnakes take up their quarters in a prairie-dog town; occupying the same holes and the snakes devouring the young dogs."

"I should very much like to see a prairie-dog town," said Bob. "I have read so much about the marmots."

"You'll see a danged sight more'n yer want ter up kentry," remarked the old scout as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "I reckons we-'uns hed better stake ther stock cluss in ter-night. Bob an' Green kin stan' g'ard fust part o' ther night, an' Benito an' me'll take ther wust watch, when ther reds 'll come ef they're comin' at all."

At this hint all proceeded to lead in the animals and secure them with less length of rope, in a more compact body. With the exception of Green, who took the first watch, all were soon sleeping sweetly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEMONS OF THE LAKE.

BENITO was on the last watch, and well did he employ his time, enlarging the prairie-oven and building a huge fire in and over the same.

The young horse-breaker then removed the feathers and entrails of the two turkeys and prepared a dressing composed of wild onions and corn bread, hashed as well as was possible with a bowie-knife, and seasoned with salt and chile chipnes, which grew in abundance on the river.

He then bound the fowls around with green grass, securing them compactly with strings of fresh stripped bark, and the fire having burned down low, the fowls were buried in the glowing embers and covered over with sods and earth.

Breakfast well under way, in half a dozen trips Benito conveyed the pack-load of rawhide strips, obtained at the Saunders ranch, to a pool of water a few yards from the camp, where he sunk them under water with pieces of petrified wood, of which there was a plenty beneath the bottom timber. Then he baked a fresh supply of corn-bread in the iron camp oven, prepared coffee, removed the animals to fresh grass; and, as the first gray streaks of morning lit up the east, aroused his comrades.

When Bob and Green entered camp from their morning wash at the pool the horse-breaker was in the act of removing the covering of burnt grass which enveloped the fowls, disclosing them, baked to a turn, the air being filled with a savory smell especially tantalizing to a hungry person.

There was no delay, however, for at once the four began in a workmanlike manner and soon there was left but a remnant of bones.

"A tip-top feast!" said Green heartily, "and I hope to enjoy many another such."

"Yes, but the turk's w'u'd 'a' bin mighty dry eatin' ef Benito hedn't stuffed 'em wi' bacon an' onions, an' cooked 'em the way he did. Take ther breast o' a wild turkey, an' brile it on a stick, an' it's dry ez a chip. Take a spring turkey in ther fall, when ther rollin' fat, an' yer kin run 'em down. Ther good feed then."

"Then you can run a turkey down, can you?"

"Bet yer life yer kin," answered Old Rocky. "Late in ther fall, arter a fair crop o' oak nuts, an' ther fat, they can't fly fur. Cut 'em off from timber when they're on ther percher, an' run 'em a while, an' ther fools 'll stick ther heads in under a buch o' grass, thinkin' ther bull ov 'em iz outer sight. I've see'd Benito, thar, take in half a dozen ov 'em, goin' at full speed, pickin' 'em up ez they stuck thar heads in ther grass, plum tuckered out wi' runnin', an' Benito not slacken up his nag whilst he war doin' ther job, but leanin' off his mustang, an' wringin' ther necks an' droppin' 'em fur me ter round up. Benito are a dangerous customer when he's hungry; an' goes fur meat just a-bilin'."

"And how many turkeys generally flock together?" asked Green.

"Not many 'round this-a-ways; but up kentry, on ther upper Nueces, an' on ther Pecos, yer kin see five an' six hundred at a single sight. They makes a big rumpus when they gits a scar' an' stampede on ther run with ther wings a fluffin'."

Once started on the subject of turkeys and Old Rocky and the boys might have wasted an hour or more had Benito not recalled to their mind the programme for the morning—an attempt to capture the alligator gar.—After some little discussion it was agreed that the camp should remain without a guard, as there seemed little risk in so leaving it. With extravagant ideas of the fun ahead Green and Bob got their rifles and ammunition and were soon at the heels of Benito and the old scout.

The trail made by the two boys the previous evening was easily followed. In a very short time the party halted within ten feet of the lake, and Benito cautiously peeped over in the exact spot where the boys had stood when they saw the mammoth fish.

With a gesture of vexation and disappointment the young horse-breaker drew back exclaiming:

"Casita! we are in bad luck. The gar is not here."

"Don't be so danged r'iled 'bout it, Benito, I reckon I kin call ther cuss ef he's anyways near—an' plenty o' alligators along wi' him."

Taking his lasso from Benito he secured one end of the rope to a tree and then made his way down the bank to the water's edge, partially supporting himself with the cord.

"Bueno hombre!" exclaimed Benito, in a gratified voice. "I understand your trick now. Come hither, senores, and I think you'll soon

have the pleasure of seeing the huge fish again."

Both boys sprung eagerly to the side of the horse-breaker; and observed that the lake presented an entirely different aspect from that of the previous evening. Not an alligator was in sight, and the lake was smooth as a mirror.

"Where are the alligators now?" exclaimed Bob in surprise.

"They are across the lake, on the shore, lying in the sun, but if I'm not mistaken you will see plenty of them soon. Watch Rocky! he is going to do something you never would have thought of."

The old scout, who had secured a foothold on a projecting root at the water's edge, now leaned over and with the palm of his hand struck the surface of the water, pat, pat, pat, sounding, as it was intended as though some animal was lapping the water with its tongue.

This experiment was repeated for some time. Then a half-suppressed cry broke from the lips of the horse-breaker, as a series of waves stirred the surface of the lake, showing that some large fish, or amphibious monster was approaching the point where Old Rocky was stationed.

"Quick!" whispered Benito to the anxiously watching boys.

"Get the pole, and thrust the small end toward me."

Full of excitement the boys sprung to obey, and almost at the same moment Old Rocky clambered up the bank by the aid of the lasso, which he then loosened first from the tree and then secured to the end of the pole which the boys thrust toward him.

In an instant more, the entrails of the turkey which had been saved for the purpose, were attached to the other end of the lasso and the pole drawn out from the timber and held over the water by the old scout, Benito grasping and cocking his rifle, the boys edging up to obtain a view of the proceedings.

Nearer and nearer approached the waves, which betrayed the presence of some monster beneath them.

Taking a warning look at Benito, Old Rocky let fall the bait on the surface of the water, the same instant drawing it up some six inches.

Not ten feet away from the bait the waters suddenly became troubled. Then the boys saw a huge body dart with great velocity through the water into the air, a huge pair of long jaws opened, filled with saw-like teeth, snapping the rawhide lasso off as though it was but a cotton string.

But at the same instant Benito's rifle rung sharply in their ears, and they beheld the mammoth fish spring bodily from the water, fall back and roll over, showing its belly uppermost, which was of a yellowish-white color.

"By the jumpin' jehossifat! Yer done that neat ez a pin!" exclaimed Old Rocky. "I c'u'dn't 'a' made that shot myself. I swan ter cricky thet's ther biggest fish I ever seen w'ar skin or scale. He'd chaw a dry rawhide inter hash afore yer c'u'd wink twicet!"

A wild hurrah rung out over the lake from the delighted boys, who threw up their sombreros, and gazed down at the big fish in wonder.

"Eezy, eezy, boys! Look yonder!" interrupted the old scout suddenly, cocking his rifle as he spoke, while Benito reloaded.

Out on the lake a score of huge alligators could be seen approaching, their hideous heads plowing through the water, sending long waves out on either side.

"Now, senores," said Benito, "you have an opportunity for trying at once your rifles and the thickness of an alligator's hide. Fire away!"

The boys leveled their guns at the foremost two of the advancing saurians, which were now not twenty yards away, but when they fired to their surprise the monsters continued to approach.

"You see that it is true that you can't make an impression on their hides with a rifle ball. Now do Rocky and me the favor of casting a piece of dead wood just to the east of them, so as to strike about ten feet from their heads."

Leaning his rifle against a tree Bob did as requested.

As the dead wood struck the water with a splash the alligators slightly turned, bringing their heads so as to point down the lake.

On the instant Benito and the old scout fired.

At once the lake became a boiling mass of water. Hither and thither darted the two alligators, thrashing the waters into foam with their tails, and driving the unhurt reptiles in fear into the depths below.

This lasted for but a moment. Then the monsters, after lying a little while upon the

surface, still save for the snapping of their ponderous jaws, rolled over, dead. Both were shot through the eye—the only vulnerable spot save the tender skin just back of the fore leg.

"What in heavens are you going to do now?" exclaimed Green, as he saw that Benito was rapidly disrobing.

"I am going into the lake after the gar."

"Going into the lake? Surely you are not wild enough for that! The alligators will tear you to pieces."

"I do not intend to give them the chance. The fact is, an alligator will not attack a naked white man, and I am nearly white. A man with clothes on, that is in the water, or a naked colored man, would soon be snapped up by them. Am I not right, Senor Rocky?"

"Purty nigh right," answered the scout. "But ef a naked white man war ter linger long enuff among 'em ter git 'quainted, they wouldn't mind shakin' his paw, an' chawin' his ears off—head throw'd in—jist to make things lively. But, Benito, I dozent mind takin' a soak, an' I'll help yer git ther gar; though I don't see what good ther critter's goin' to be to yer."

So saying Old Rocky also began to undress, regardless of the alligators which, now that the tumult had ended, began to bob up their heads until a large number was to be seen, every one pointed toward the gar, whose blood dyed the waters.

Removing their revolvers Old Rocky and Benito buckled their belts which held their knives, around their naked bodies, and Benito plunged head-foremost off of the bank, disappearing beneath the water and coming up on the other side of the floating gar. Then the scout cast him the lasso which he made fast to the fish. The boys hauled away on the line while Rocky sprung into the water to aid his friend.

Previous to springing from the bank Benito had cut off the limb of a pecan tree, taking from it a portion about a foot long, and perhaps three inches in diameter, which he had sharpened at both ends. This he had taken with him, thrusting it inside of his belt. What he was to do with it was a mystery to the boys; which was now to be explained.

When the horse-breaker had secured the lasso to the gar-fish he placed the back of the blade of his bowie between his teeth, loosened the billet of pecan wood in his belt, so that it could be readily drawn, and then, whirling in the water toward the middle of the lake, with his hands deep in the water he swam toward the alligators, which seemed to be watching the proceedings more in curiosity than rage.

Old Rocky, knowing the adventurous spirit of the brokaro and supposing that he was about to do some dangerous feat, to show the boys he was as fearless in the water as upon the land, swam quietly in his wake.

No sooner did Benito approach the leader, an enormous alligator, than, as if eager for conflict, the huge king of the lake slowly swam toward the brokaro.

"Be kinder keerful o' yerself, leetle pard," admonished Old Rocky, but the horse-breaker swam steadily on, until, not five feet from the reptile, his right arm was raised from the water, disclosing the sharpened stick that he grasped tightly in his hand. Then the huge jaws of the lizard opened, and his tail squirmed as if gathering strength for a lunge.

CHAPTER V.

FIGHTING A MONSTER—A "MITEY" FOE.

ONLY an instant did the alligator and man occupy the position just described. Then the brokaro, with a rapid dart, thrust his hand between the fearful, teeth-lined jaws, and at once the two disappeared from sight in a boiling mass of foam, the spray flying twenty feet into the air.

With paling faces Bob and Sam watched the foam-lashed waters until, to their delight and surprise they saw Benito, cool and unharmed, darting away toward the shore, seated astride the back of the alligator, whose mouth was stretched wide open by the sharpened stick that had been placed in the gaping jaws by the young brokaro.

Not only was the huge lizard made harmless as far as biting went, but its mouth being held wide open prevented its diving down into the lake, and so getting rid of the unusual load upon its back.

Once only did the alligator try this, but it did not descend far enough to submerge its rider, since the rush of water down its throat nearly strangled it.

It was a wild and extraordinary sight to wit-

ness; and Old Rocky, who swam ashore after seeing Benito safely mounted, sat with the boys, all laughing heartily at the extravagant exertions of the strange steed, and the dexterity of its supple rider, who seemed to be enjoying himself hugely.

In a very short time the brokaro and his water-horse arrived beneath the overhanging boughs of the opposite shore, and reaching up Benito cut with his bowie-knife a strong piece of vine, some four feet long.

Leaning forward, before the alligator got its paws upon the shore, the brokaro thrust one end of the vine within the jaws, and drew it through. Then, with all his strength, he pulled backward and to the right, bringing the amphibious monster about, into the lake again, and having it under fair control by means of the vine with which he had bridled it.

Amidst increased laughter from the amused spectators, Benito came at great speed across the lake, yelling as he came:

"Make the lasso fast to the tree!"

This was quickly done by Old Rocky, and as the alligator reached the bank, its eyes rolling in agony, the sharpened stick still between its distended jaws, Benito grasped the lasso with his left hand, and raising his right drove his bowie-knife to the hilt just back of the forearm of the monster.

Springing quickly up the bank, hand over hand, by the lasso, the brokaro barely escaped the thundering blows given by the alligator's tail, as it lashed the water in frenzy, its blood staining the lake for many yards.

Eager hands pulled Benito up the bank, and all turned to watch the dying struggles of the saurian.

"I allers sed yer c'd ride anything what wore legs!" exclaimed Rocky, gazing with pride at his friend. "But I never counted in one o' them tarrifyin' drink-thrashers. Gi'n us yer paw, leetle pard; I thinks more on yer every day. It war ther purtiest sight I ever seen, but risky, pard, 'tarnal risky."

"Risky!" broke in Bob. "I should think it was. I would not dare to venture into the lake, even now, when the alligators seem thoroughly frightened."

"It had ter be did jest so," the old scout continued, as he combed out his wet locks with his fingers. "If it hadn't, this party 'ud 'a' bin without a boss mustanger, an' ther bull alligator 'ud 'a' hed a hashed buckaro fur breakfast."

"It is a feat easily accomplished by one with a little nerve," interposed Benito. "As soon as I inserted the stick I dove below, and knowing by the lashing of his tail where the danger lay, I came up by its fore paws, and climbed on its back. I had a good ride; also a bath, and feel refreshed. Now, after the time we have lost in its capture, what are we to do with the big gar-fish?"

"I wish," said Bob, "that we could, in some way, preserve it. It would be a great curiosity."

"There is no way to do so," returned Benito. "In a few hours it will be swelled to twice its present size. Still, I have an idea. We might draw the fish on shore and convey it to one of the nests of the red-ants. By the time we return this way the ants will have eaten every vestige of flesh from its bones without in any way disarranging the skeleton. I do not know of any way you can transport it then, but you can have the satisfaction of seeing how this fish, which darts like a lightning flash through the water, is framed."

"As yours is the only plan proposed, I guess we will have to adopt it; but where is there an ants' nest, such as you speak of?"

At Bob's question Benito turned to Old Rocky and gave a peculiar look, a merry twinkle dancing in his eye, though unnoticed by the boys.

"Senor Rocky, did you not observe a red-ants' mound to our right, as we came here, not far from our trail, and back some dozen yards from this point?"

"Purty sart'in I did," answered the scout, puzzled by the side winks of the brokaro, but knowing that fun was in the mind of his questioner.

Both Bob and Green sprang eagerly into the woods on a tour of discovery, and the old scout, after a word of explanation from Benito, lay down on the bank, struggling hard to suppress his laughter, while the brokaro, with calm visage, awaited the course of events.

One, two, three minutes passed; and their loud yells came to the ears of the two who were awaiting the return of the ant-hunters.

Nearer came the yells, accompanied by the sound of crashing brush; and then Bob and

Green, their features convulsed with pain and fear, rushed wildly past, without looking at their friends, and sprung down the bank into the lake, disappearing beneath the waters, which, a few moments before they had declared they would not enter for any consideration.

The old scout rolled about on the bank of the lake, his loud laughter sounding far and near; but only a faint smile rested on the face of the brokaro.

The heads of both boys popped above the surface at the same instant, both gazing with reproach at their friends as they trod water and vigorously rubbed various parts of their body and limbs, or struck viciously at floating specks about them on the water.

The loud laugh of the old scout at first grated harshly on their ears, and highly offended them; but soon, the ludicrous side of their adventure overcame their anger, and the boys clambered, dripping, up the bank, hastily disrobed, and picked the remaining red-ants from their clothing, joining, meanwhile, in the laugh at their mishap.

"Why did you not tell us, Benito?" asked Bob, reproachfully. "You should have let us know that they bit."

"In the first place," answered the brokaro, "I knew you would ridicule any representation of the danger of approaching the mounds of such a small insect. In the next I knew you must learn the danger by experience, or we would have you yelling wildly at us some time when it might peril our lives. I knew your curiosity would lead you to inspect the habitations of the red-ants, and that they, in turn, would make war on you. This was a good place to have it out with them, as water was near. Truly, senores, these little insects would swarm on you and torture you to death, if you were not where you could get them off by plunging into the lake."

"I do not disbelieve one word, now, in regard to their torturing abilities. Do you, Green?"

"Not much. I would as soon be rolled down hill in a barrel of needles as to venture near another nest, and as for the garfish—I've no desire to see its skeleton if I am to be forced to go near that mound again where the little creepers live, that carry chain lightning in their sting. We won't get over this trip for a day. The bites burn like fire."

"Wait until you get into camp," said Benito, in a reassuring manner. "I will mash some prickly pear for you, and the pulp will remove the stinging pain immediately."

As the boys were really suffering, an almost instant move was made, Old Rocky remarking as they went along:

"Yer musn't git riled at yer old pard, 'caze 'tain't offen he gits ter see anything ter laff at; an' yer musn't hold hard feelin's ag'in' Benito, fur it's jist az he's talked it. Ye'd 'a' made fun ef we'd 'a' tole yer them pesky little things war dang'us ter fool with, an' yer'd 'a' got cotched some uther time."

"We'll feel more like forgiving Benito when he applies the prickly pear," answered Bob, trying to laugh. "If it has such healing properties it is a valuable medicine."

"Ye'r right. It'll heal a gash, draw out p'ison, cure a sore back on a boss, an' if yer scoop up a pan o' brackey, r'iley water, an' throw a piece in, it'll make it clear in two skips."

"Yes," added Benito, "and all the transportation on the lower Rio Grande, which is done by oxen, is dependent on the prickly pear. There is little or no grass there, and they feed the animals almost entirely on that species of cactus."

"But how can they be eaten, when they are covered with thorns?" asked Bob, in surprise.

"The teamsters build a big fire, and with a pole hold the prickly pear over the flames, burning all the thorns off."

"Well, it is strange that when one thing is wanting, something else is found as a substitute," remarked Green, as they arrived in camp. Then, having leaned their arms against a tree the boys were soon supplied with the green pulp of the round-leaved cactus, to apply to the various stings made by the red-ants.

While the boys were attending to their stings Old Rocky and Benito commenced preparing the raw-hide strips for braiding into lassoes with which to catch mustangs when they had arrived further up the river.

One end of a long strip, which consisted of a whole beef's hide, cut in the manner previously described, was tied to a tree. Then holding the strip tight with one hand, a knife in the other scraped off the hair and pared down the irregularities, making the thong of uniform thickness the whole length. Then the strips were

again cast into the pool, and others made ready, until all were prepared.

During the afternoon and the two days following all were busy; Benito and Old Rocky braiding, Bob and Green rubbing tallow into the lassoes after they were finished and dried in the sun. The raw-hide ropes being braided when taken from the water were at first soft and pliable; but shrunk up compactly when dried.

After the first greasing the ropes were thrown over limbs of trees, and quickly drawn back and forth to rub off the sharp edges of the hide, and make them more easy to handle.

By the evening of the third day after the killing of the gar-fish twenty lassoes were ready for use and Benito and Old Rocky decided on a move up stream the following morning.

Everything was made ready, and though, as yet, no signs of Indians had been seen, on this, the last night in the lake camp, the boys received a long lecture from the old scout, in regard to future vigilance, as Indian war-parties, especially of the Apaches, frequently came down the Nueces, on raids upon the stock ranches of the Frio and Medina.

CHAPTER VI.

A "SIGN" IN THE SKY—THE WOLVES OF THE TRAIL.

BRIGHT and early the next morning everything was securely packed on the two mules, and soon all were on the march. The animal bought from the Saunders ranch, having often been up the river on expeditions of similar nature, readily followed the horses, the San Antonio mule easily keeping up, though more heavily packed.

Bob, while riding along, ever anxious to learn all he could about the strange country through which he was traveling, was continually asking questions of Benito, who gladly returned all the information desired.

"That plant with the sharp-pointed leaves," he responded, in answer to questions, "is what the Texans call soap-weed, and it is appropriately named. The root, powdered on a stone and rubbed on clothes, gives out a suds and cleanses woolen stuffs much better than manufactured soap."

"That tall shrub with leaves almost similar to the soap-weed, and belonging to the same family, is the Spanish dagger. Its leaves being as tough, almost, as steel, and sharp and strong, you could easily run one through a man. Mustangs in a stampede often get wounded mortally by running against them."

"That large, wide-leaved plant, which also has a sharp point, with others along its sides, is the maguey. There are large plantations of it in Mexico. At certain seasons the heart is cut or scooped out, into the cavity a large amount of sap flowing every day. This sap is collected and distilled into mezcal, or whisky, of great strength. But little of it can be drank at a time, as it produces a perfect frenzy of intoxication."

"That small plant you see my mustang has just trodden upon and broken is rattlesnake weed, the under side of the leaf, as you see, being figured and mottled exactly like the skin of a rattlesnake. Should you get bitten by a snake a portion of those leaves, immediately applied to the wound, with a plentiful quantity of the leaves chewed and the juice swallowed, will ward off the effects of the poison. Many, however, prefer to kill the snake and bind the quivering flesh to the wound. The meat changes in color to a green as the poison is drawn out, when a fresh piece is applied."

"I should prefer not being under the necessity of using either remedy," began Bob, but he was suddenly interrupted by a low cry from the horse-breaker.

"Hold!" said the latter, reining his horse suddenly in upon its haunches, an act which brought all to a halt. "Look ahead, over the bend in the river, Senor Rocky."

"Thar's what mought be a bad sign, an' then, ag'in, it moughtn't," said the old scout, in a low, deliberate manner. "Howsomedever, I reckon as this 'ere outfit ain't sp'illin' fur ter be sculped. I'd better skin out an' see what's ahead. You-uns hed better lay low in the bush until I gives a whoop, er shows myself."

With this advice Old Rocky turned his horse into the timber, threw the end of his lariat to Benito, and, taking his rifle, disappeared within the dense wood, which, for from a quarter of a mile to a mile in width, extended along both sides of the Nueces.

Bob and Green were both puzzled and alarmed by this mysterious movement. As Rocky passed out of sight Bob exclaimed:

"What is the meaning of this, Benito? I see nothing alarming over the bend where you seem to locate something dangerous."

"Look high up in the air. You will see a number of turkey-buzzards circling."

"And what does that indicate?"

"It is not a sure thing, but it is a strong proof that there is a camp there either of Indians, Mexicans or mustangers. If either of the former they are our deadly enemies. The buzzards fly high. If the camp was abandoned they would be in it, or on the adjoining trees. They await either the departure of humans, so that they can pick up the offal left behind, or the death of some animal which has been wounded and their singularly acute instinct tells them has been doomed. Old Rocky will soon ascertain which it is. Allow your animals to feed, senores; they will not be so liable to whinny or the mules to squeal."

"Tain't no camp, boys," exclaimed the scout, as he swung himself into the saddle. "But I haz struck ther trail o' er party o' tarnal ha'r-tarers, what can't be more ner ten leagues from this."

"What tribe, senor?" asked Benito eagerly.

"The'r a party o' 'Paches, sum o' Lone Wolf's cut-throats, I rec'ons; an' ther best ov it ar' thar ain't more ner a dozen, ov 'em, an' haz got 'bout forty hosses, more or less."

"I don't see," exclaimed Bob, "how you can make anything good out of being within half a day's ride of a war-party of murderous Apaches, whether they have extra horses or not. How will that benefit us?"

"Yer skin's thin, y'unker," returned the old scout. Then, without paying any more attention to the boys, he turned to Benito:

"I tell yer, leetle pard, we-'uns haz got a soft thing ef we handles our ropes kerrect, an' I s'pose we kin. Leastwise, thar's a dead certainty, ef the lads warn't so tarnal green, ov our wipin' out the hull caboodle, an' bein' a heap o' horse-meat ahead o' the game."

Benito listened attentively, weighing every word, and watching the face of the old man as he spoke. When he ceased the eyes of the horse-breaker sparkled, he slapped the breech of his rifle with his hand, and in a voice full of determination exclaimed:

"Senor Rocky, the Apache dogs shall not all see the Pecos. We are after mustangs. If we can get the broken horses from the thieves ahead—the horses that have been stolen from the ranches below—we can herd and drive those much better. Besides we shall punish the murderers of women and children, and have the pleasure of returning the stolen stock to its real owners."

"Kerrect ev'ry time, leetle pard; an' we'll do some tall thinkin' ter-night ter plan how we kin sarcumvent the painted cusses. An' we'll take ther boys into council right away. I say, boys!"

Old Rocky paused, and turning in the saddle beckoned to Bob and Green, who at once ranged alongside.

"I reckon yer hez heard an' read a heap 'bout Injuns, an' hez cum ter ther 'clusion thet th'ar az 'vengeful, an filled wi' az much pure b'iled down cussedness az any critter what walks, crawls, er flies 'bout this yere yarth. But th'ar a danged sight wuss ner yer thanks. Benito, sling yer lariats round a limb, an' you boys kim on, all ov yer."

All had now arrived within the horseshoe bend of the river, and dismounting their lariats were secured to limbs. Then Old Rocky followed by the rest descended a steep, rocky bank, filing into the timber, but not going half a pistol-shot from their horses.

"Thar's a sight, pards, thet shows ez plain an' plainer'n loud talk 'bout what ther size o' a Pache's h'art are."

It was indeed a pitiable sight at which Old Rocky pointed.

An Indian horse, which, from the traces of war-paint on its hams, had evidently belonged to a chief, stood before them, its eyes shining with agony, its head hanging to the earth. The feathered shafts of three arrows projected from the animal's body, and from the wounds caused by these torturing weapons the blood had flowed and dried in the sun. Still, at every slight movement, the crust broke and the vital fluid slowly welled forth.

"Great heavens! What is the meaning of this, Benito?"

Bob was full of pity for the poor brute.

"Ther hoss hes suffered enuff," said Old Rocky, and drawing his bowie-knife the old scout, with a careful blow, struck with the point of the blade just back of the animal's ears, severing the spinal cord.

As once the horse dropped dead.

"The meaning, senors," said Benito, answering Bob's question, "is that an Indian rode this horse from the Pecos, down on the raid, and did not spare quirt. In fact, as you see, the animal was completely broken down. When the Apache brute found that the horse could no longer carry him he doomed the poor beast to a lingering death, that was full of torture. He fired his arrows into the body where they would give intense pain and produce running, festering fly-blown sores, but carefully avoided giving a wound that would produce any death but the most lingering. Perhaps you have not noticed that the horse's lips are cut and split in several places so as to torture him should he attempt to eat grass. One of his hamstrings is cut, too. It's as fiendish a set of acts as I ever saw done to a dumb brute, though I have seen worse tortures inflicted on human beings by Apaches, Comanches and Kioways."

"How do you know these Indians belonged to the Apaches?" asked Green, an intense hatred for the perpetrators of the dastardly deed showing itself plainly in his voice and face.

"We know by the arrows," explained Benito, as he drew one from the dead horse. "Witness another devilish bit of ingenuity in these untortured red-skins. As you see, there is a groove running spirally from the feather to the point of the arrow."

"Yes," answered both of the boys in concert, as they examined the long, blood-stained shaft, held in the hands of the brokaro.

"Well, that is cut to allow the blood to flow freely when the arrow is fired into man or beast, and thus cause death more certainly. The Comanches cut two grooves straight with the shaft; the Apaches, as you observe, one, spirally winding about the shaft."

"The points are made of iron; where do they get them?"

"They exchange buffalo-hides for them with the traders. Flint arrow-heads are seldom used now by any of the tribes, except a few for hunting purposes."

Once started Benito might have held the boys for a long time as interested questioners and listeners, but Rocky, to whom these things were a good deal more than a twice told tale, put an end to the conversation by calling upon all, rather impatiently, to follow him. Then he led the way back to the horses.

"Danger are all 'round us, bet yer bottom dollar; an' ef yer eyelids lose ther grip ther hull outfit stan's a show ter be wiped out. We'll camp in ther thick timber, Benito, an' make our fire plum under ther bank o' ther river, whar the blaze can't be see'd."

"It's a good plan," assented Benito, "though they may have left spies behind, whose eyes are upon us this minute. We will find such a place, for it is very well to be cautious."

After some little search they found the spot that was entirely suitable, the position being guarded on three sides by the river, and only open to attack from the north.

The mules were here quickly relieved of their burdens, and staked with the horses in an open spot, well shielded from outside view by the surrounding trees. Then a hasty meal was prepared by Benito, who, in a few moments of time, caught enough catfish to supply the whole party. Although deer were plenty all agreed to do without venison, since, for their own safety, no firearms should be discharged.

As soon as supper was over Benito and Old Rocky, having cautioned the boys to be silent and watchful, shouldered their rifles and moved out from the bend to take up and follow the trail of the Apaches from the point where they had left the wounded horse. The sun was still two hours above the horizon, and they hoped, by a careful examination, to ascertain the exact number of this war-party, and other facts in regard to it which the "signs" might disclose.

Bob and Green, with arms ready for defense, took up a position where, screened from view themselves, they could still watch the animals. Conversing at times in a low tone, at others they listened nervously and impatiently to the clamping of their stock as they tore off the rich, rank grass from the virgin sod, to the gurgle and rush of the waters, or the yelp, shriek, hoot, and song of the beasts and birds of the night, which were making ready for the coming nocturnal concert.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOYS DRAW BLOOD—A GHASTLY JOKE.

NIGHT came slowly on, and still the two boys sat in the same position they had occupied at the departure of their friends.

They were nervous enough now; in fact,

were more than half frightened. They had no fire, and the bottom timber seemed by the extraordinary din to be filled with ravenous beasts, without doubt drawn into the vicinity by the scent from the dead horse. The long-drawn howl of the "lone loafer," or black wolf of the prairies, the sharp, continuous barking of numerous coyotes, the occasional shriek of a panther, sandwiched in with the hooting of owls, the strange cries of chaparral cocks, and the flapping of the wings of the buzzards that were collecting to feast upon the carcass they had so long waited for, all served to unnerve the two boys who sat in the dark shades of the Nueces bottom, waiting impatiently for the coming of those upon whom they now knew their lives depended. Even men of considerable frontier experience might have felt anxiety for the safety of the absent comrades; and it was no wonder that Bob and Green at times were tortured by gloomy forebodings.

By crawling a few paces they could peep between the branches, down upon the waters of the river, and at the spot where their now dead camp-fire had been built. Just above the ashes, at a distance of some ten feet, and about twenty from their hiding-place were the camp-tricks—saddles, bridles, ropes and the like—lying in a space entirely clear of brush.

The boys, not dreaming of any danger, from that point were watching the animals as well as they could through the gloom when a slight splash in the river caused their hearts to jump into their throats, and each to lay his hand in warning on the other's shoulder. Then they silently crept to the opposite side of the clump and parted the branches.

Although they could not see distinctly the marks which we shall point out they had no trouble in distinguishing the form of an Indian, who, from the opposite bank of the river, was stooping over, and throwing water into his mouth with one hand.

The Apache was probably on his first war-path. His front hair was cut from temple to temple, even with the eyebrows, the remainder flowing down his back to his waist, and only ornamented with a few raven feathers, to signify that as yet he had done no great deeds in battle, the time was yet to come when he might have the right to wear the feathers of the more noble and warlike bird.

Buckskin leggings held in place by the beaded belt that also carried his long scalping-knife, moccasins of buffalo-calf skins and a quiver of the same filled with arrows, and the bow carried in his left hand made his outfit. Doubtless left on the back trail as a spy the young Apache brave was scouring the timber on foot, eager to meet with some signs of an enemy.

With bated breath Bob and Green pressed through the leaves—they knew that the Indian could detect no signs of a camp from where he stood, but they dreaded his inactivity since at any moment some one of the animals might betray them.

When, however, they saw him step slowly into the river, and holding his bow above his head, ford the stream, stepping on the shore at the very point where they had cooked their supper, their feelings were too deep for description.

As if to favor the young adventurers the moon now threw its mellow light directly down upon the waters and upon the site of their camp, though the same illumination showed to the sharp, snake-like, wandering eyes of the Indian the ashes of the camp-fire. With a single guttural "Ugh!" the savage stooped, thrust his hand into the ashes, and then rose once more erect, while his hideous face, upturned, showed a fiendish look of exultation, and his throat swelled with the yell of delight which prudence forbade him to utter.

By this the boys knew that the ashes still contained hot embers, a plain indication that the fire was not long since made.

The Apache knew that it was not the work of his fellows, even without the sight of an unlucky coffee-pot that had been left near by in the grass. This latter told him that some one of the party would doubtless soon return in search of it and give him an opportunity to win rank and a scalp. So great was his joy at the discovery that the Indian lost prudence, and in two silent bounds was on the bank above.

But as he sprung his features suddenly changed, his hand flew to his quiver, and fitting an arrow with a dexterous movement, he stood with bow half drawn, a perfect picture of savage warfare, a bravo of the forest at bay. Upon the bank he had at last seen the various utensils, packs and saddles of a party of white men. Like lightning the thought struck his brain that he

himself had been outwitted, that a trap had been laid for him, and that the eyes of his enemies were upon him.

Prudence told the savage to spring back down the bank, but the utter silence, the mysterious absence of any human beings when they had had no warnings of his approach, and the desire to distinguish himself even at the risk of his life, caused him to stand his ground for a moment.

As the Indian leaped upon the bank, Bob and Green brought their rifles to bear, that strange, indefinable feeling filling their minds which is always more or less present when deliberately aiming at a human foe.

Only a moment stood the young Apache with half-drawn bow. Perhaps his instinct told him that he was in deadly peril; perhaps the animal magnetism of those eyes glancing along the rifle barrels that were hidden from his view in the shadow sent a thrill through his frame. Quickly he turned on his heel, his gaze bending backward, and then he sprung afar out toward the waters.

But as he sprung the blended reports of two rifles broke upon the air, the hands that grasped bow and arrow were thrown up spasmodically, and his sharp death-yell rung through the bottom timber as he fell with a dull thud on the bank below.

The report and yell was followed by the snorting and trampling of the horses and mules. Then beast and bird hushed howl and hoot and song, and the river bottom became, for a moment, silent as death as the two boys bounded from their covert in among the horses, filled with horror by the death-yell, and the dreadful sight of the Indian's last leap. Quickly they slipped cartridges into their rifles, and stood looking anxiously toward their camp, every moment expecting to see the form of an Apache, or to receive the point of a hunting-arrow.

Situated thus, to their excited minds the bottom peopled by a savage foe, it was no wonder a few moments later, as the sound of cracking branches came to their ears from their rear, they should whirl in their tracks and stand with rifles leveled and fingers on the triggers as Benito and Old Rocky broke into sight.

"Gehossifat—Gerrusilem!" yelled the old scout, in a voice of alarm. "Ar' yer both gittin' lunny that yer go in fur ter git practice on a Injun trail, an' end off wi' takin' a shoot at yer pards? What'n thunder'n lightnin's got inter yer? Didn't we-uns say shootin's ruled outen this game fur a while?"

All this the old man rattled off in short meter, with a voice and manner which showed he was greatly offended.

"Don't be so fast, Senor Rocky," interposed Benito, as he came nearer and saw by the manner and look of the boys that something had occurred that was outside of the usual course of events.

"The senioritos can, I presume, give a good reason for firing, and we know that the war-party is too far away to have heard the report."

With feelings somewhat hurt, Bob and Green made rapid strides through the animals and brush to the camp in the open by the river bank, Benito following, and the old scout grumbling in the rear.

Both boys now knew that the Indian was dead, for they saw his painted face by the water side as they came into camp, and they seated themselves on their saddles, while Bob, knowing that neither Benito nor Rocky had seen the Apache, suddenly recovered his unconcern as he was struck with a desire to play a game on the old scout in return for his show of ill-temper.

With this idea in his mind Bob spoke up, abruptly.

"Do you both, scouts that you are, and used to this kind of life, mean to say that you came through the clump of bushes where we first saw you and did not catch a glimpse of a dead panther?"

"I don't ginerly hunt dead panthers," answered the old scout, his voice somewhat changed. "Ef ye see'd a panther so close ter ther stack az thet, I duz'nt blame yer fur shootin'. Yer must 'a' killed ther jumpin' squaller er we'd 'a' heard him kick. Let's take a peep arter ther karkass, Benito, ther boys might er bored him, an' ther hide ar' jist what we want."

Speaking thus Old Rocky retraced his steps, followed by Benito, who thought nothing of the boys holding back.

No sooner had Rocky and the brokaro disappeared in the brush than Bob dropped his rifle.

"Quick, Green! The Indian is dead, and we'll bring him up to play a game on those two, even if it is a tough job!"

Without hesitation Green followed down the bank, and the two, with much exertion brought up the Apache and placed him against a sapling where they buckled him fast with two straps, the one passing under his arms, the other under his chin. The red-skin still held his bow and arrow in the gripe of death, and faced the point of entrance from the horses to the camp, looking terribly natural. All being thus hastily arranged the boys grasped their rifles once more and quickly passed in among the animals, as they came near their former positions Bob crying out in a voice of well assumed anxiety:

"Can you find the panther, pards?"

"Nary a panther!" shouted Rocky, in as surly a tone as before. "I reckon it war a owl a-blinkin' at yer."

"If it was a panther," reasoned Benito, "it would be a mere chance if they should kill the animal, for they would have been too excited to shoot accurately, and they are not used to such large and dangerous beasts."

"Panther er no panther, I'm goin' ter pick up sum more fodder. Ther tramp hes giv me a appertite fur more grub. Boys, I reckon yer panther are a-tearin' up dead hoss by this, an' a-laffin' at hisself 'bout yer loose shootin'."

Once more Old Rocky started back for camp, Benito stopping to tell the boys not to mind the old man's ill-nature as he had walked far, was tired, and felt hurt at their disobeying orders when the safety of all depended upon their silent and circumspect movements.

Benito, as he spoke, thought that the boys did not seem to pay much attention to his words, their looks being bent toward the camp. He passed on, leaving them to change the horses to fresh grass.

But the brokaro had not taken half a dozen steps when he was startled by the report of the old scout's rifle, which rang sharp through the timber. Alarmed, he cocked his own piece and rushed through the bushes into camp, knowing that nothing but extreme danger would have caused Old Rocky to fire. There Old Rocky stood motionless and silent before an Apache Indian.

Springing to his side Benito saw in an instant the mystery of the rifle-shot that he and the old scout had heard before reaching the vicinity of the camp; and now, too, he understood the singular manner and actions of Bob and Green.

The face of Old Rocky was a study.

"Bamboozled! Sold out an' nary a thing left to stand!" exclaimed the scout in astonishment and chagrin, as he gazed from the dead Apache to Benito, whose surprise was no less manifest than his own.

"Dig a hole an' kiver me up, kiver me up deep. Fotch on a Piute squaw; I'm ready ter be sculped. Ther old man's gittin' wilted, wore out, an' ain't fit fur perarar life. Whar's ther boys?"

"They're changing the horses. Forgive them for this joke, old pard, for they had provocation you must admit, and that after they had just proved themselves men. Had they not killed this young brave our chances to carry out our plans would have been spoiled and our lives greatly endangered."

"Long ez yer has scouted with me yer don't know me," returned Old Rocky. "Why, I thinks a heap more o' ther lads fer this than I did afore."

At this moment Bob and Green entered the opening, both dubious about the reception they would meet with. All hesitation was put to flight when the old scout advanced with outstretched hands, saying:

"Bob, give us yer claw; Green, shake! I sets yer down as XXX, right from this time on, an' ar' sorry I spit out cross-grained words at yer. Yer haz paid me back full measure, b'ilin' over; but I holds no hard feelin's. Now take a sot down an' give us ther 'ticulars, how yer wiped ther red sculper offen our trail."

Much pleased that the old scout took their joke so pleasantly Bob and Green sat down on their saddles, and related the circumstances of their late adventure. An examination had shown Benito that their two bullets had gone through the body of the Apache, while that of Old Rocky had pierced his brain.

As the brokaro announced this the scout answered:

"Yaas, thet ar' whar I plugged him; an' boys, when yer think it over I warn't sich a blamed ole fool arter all. Fustly I war bothered 'bout yer shootin', fer I spected thar war a red left ahind, ter watch fer any part ov whites what mout come on ther trail; by zaminin' ther sign that ther cusses had some captur'd whites along, then I c'u'd 'a' took oath they hed left a scout on

ther look-out. Az I cum this-a-ways arter huntin' fur yer panther thet yer didn't shoot I war a-thinkin' 'bout yer shot havin' been heard by ther red on ther back trail. I knowd yer hed jist left this camp, an' I hed been here myself, an' nary a red war here, an' when I cum in in somethin' ov a hurry outen ther bush, ther fust thing I see'd war thet 'Pache stan'in' thar; my head bein' full o' ther likelihood o' his bein' round an' seein' him in our camp, I blazed quicker ner lubricated lightnin', but know'd I war fooled afore my shooter got cl'ar o' smoke. Now, Benito, you take ther skulp o' that 'Pache fur ther boys to kerry, an' then drag him outen camp, while I hump myself to knock together sum feed. Thar's work ahead an' we must be gittin' ready."

The Indian was scalped, dragged away from camp, and thrown into the river, to float down stream. As the boys refused to touch the scalp Benito secured it to his saddle, while Bob and Green rested satisfied with bow, arrows and belt as trophies.

CHAPTER VIII.

WAITING FOR THE GRAY.

"LEETLE pards!" said Old Rocky, after he had satisfied his reawakened appetite, and lit his pipe, "I reckons yer ar' kinder bankerin' ter know what Benito an' me run ag'in' in ther way o' sign on ther 'Pache trail, an' I'll ax him ter tell yer hisself; but az I'm squar', an' more ner half white, I'll say thet, et fust, what we did see, an' what we know'd war ahead made me wish we hedn't got you-uns in our leetle party. Thet war afore we cum in. Now, I hez found yer a-pannin' out hunk, an' o' ther right stock fur scoutin', an' Injun-fightin', ef yer on'y know ther p'int, which Benito an' this old cudermudgin 'll gi'n yer. Now, Benito, I passes. Yer kin play yer talker lively, fur we hes hefty biz ahead."

"Well, senioritos," explained Benito, "you see we knew a small war-party had passed as soon as we saw the wounded mustang and the evidences of the trail; but it was only after a long inspection of a dozen different points, and traveling many miles, that we obtained certain proofs of the extent and character of the raid. To sum up, the trail is made by a war-party of Apaches, who have swooped down on the ranches of the Medina or Frio, and not only stolen a number of horses, but held as captive a young girl and her father, whom they probably intend to take to the village. Then the father will be taken to the torture-stake, and the girl meet a fate far worse. Senor Rocky and myself have determined to save both or die in the attempt. We have decided to give up our plans for capturing mustangs, cache our lassos and everything not actually in use, leave the two mules behind, and start on the trail. If you do not care to risk the dangers ahead you can stop in camp here until we return, and try your hand at the capture of wild horses. What say you, rancheros?"

Up to their feet sprung the boys, much excited at the bare suggestion that they might not be willing to brave the dangers of the trail, while Bob exclaimed:

"Never! For what do you take us? I for one—and I know I can speak for Green, too—will go on the trail of the red devils. How do you think, after witnessing their cruelty to a dumb brute, we could rest knowing that a young girl was in their bloodthirsty hands?"

"And I," cried Green, as deeply moved, "am ready to follow the red fiends, at any risk. Count us in as two men; for boys though we may seem, while this chase lasts you will find us willing to at least attempt men's work. How we will succeed perhaps one dead Apache may give some sign."

"Buenos muchachos!" cried Benito, pleasure beaming in his eye as he grasped a hand of each.

"Shake, leetle pards!" added Rocky. "Yer words show I hazn't kalkerlated wrong, but g'aged yer both to a hair. Biz is biz. Hump yerself lively an' git things straight fur ther trail."

It was the intention of the brokaro to cache what things they did not need, in a small cave near by, and which he had discovered on one of his previous visits. To carry this out every one worked with a will. When the last armful had been transported thither, the mouth of the cave was blocked up carefully, and the pack-mules were led out on the prairie where they could not see the horses depart, and turned loose.

Half an hour from the time that all had shaken hands as pards on the dangerous trail, they rode out from the Nueces bottom at a point half a mile up the river from their camp,

and silently in the moonlight galloped over the prairie sward, keeping near to the timber line, and intending to strike the trail at the point last inspected by the old scout.

When this place was reached the bridles were slipped off, the horses were given plenty of slack lariat, and all seated themselves at the edge of the timber, intending thus to await the morning light, by which they might follow the trail.

"Come, senoritos," said Benito, when they had fairly resigned themselves to waiting. "You must learn all you can, even if you are sleepy. You may have wished to know how we were certain an old man and a young girl, his daughter, were held captives by the Apaches. First, we learned something by the footprints. The man wears rough boots and walks with a slouching gait, while she has a small gaiter and a step as light as a fawn's. It took close looking to find out even this much, for they only walked from the horses to yonder trees, a few paces, and back again. Then, however, we found this little slip of paper, that made everything clear. Read it and see."

He passed over the note as he spoke, and the boys, by the aid of a few carefully shaded snatches, perused the few lines that were hurriedly enough written, and yet in a delicate hand that spoke a higher grade of education than is usually found on the border.

"If any white man finds this let him, for the love of God, try to rescue me and my father from the hands of the murderous Apaches, who have taken us from our home. Follow this trail and save us, as you hope for mercy."

JENNIE GRANGER.

"As we hope for mercy, we will follow it!" exclaimed Green, as he ceased reading this brief but terrible appeal, and every one of the rest echoed his words. Then Benito continued his story:

"Now, to the Indians. We found by examining the bank of the river in this vicinity that there were from twelve to fifteen warriors in the party, and that five of them had fire-arms, of which one was a small-bore rifle, another a barrel that shot a blue whistler or ounce ball, another a Mississippi yager, while a smooth-bore and a shot-gun completed the assortment."

"Now you are making fun of us," interrupted Bob. "How could you find out the number of guns, to say nothing about the size of their bores?"

"There are a great many things on a trail that are easily discovered, though they may seem difficult enough until the explanation is given. In this camp the Indians took their arms to the river to clean them, and in wiping the barrels out they threw the dry leaves and strips of buckskin which they used upon the ground. These tell-tales betrayed to us the exact size of each bore. Now do you comprehend?"

"It is just as you say," replied Bob. "Impossible, or what we take to be such, become simple when explained. I never would have believed, though, that such facts could have been learned in regard to a party so far away."

"I have explained in part how we examine a camp and the kind of knowledge that can be gained. To-morrow when the sun rises you will see, if you watch Senor Rocky and myself, how difficult some parts of a trail are to follow, especially if the party try to cover their tracks and delude those following. However, in this case, as they leave a spy on their back trail, they may be careless. They will think that any signs of pursuit will be communicated to them by the young brave who, thanks to your vigilance and rifles, is in fact floating down the Nueces."

"You are very kind to explain matters to us," said Bob, as Benito ceased speaking. "Your lessons in prairie craft will not be thrown away. Green does not have much to say, but I know that he keeps up a great thinking, and has not lost a word."

"That is as it should be. Now I must take measures to procure meat without using fire-arms. I would take you with me, but you would retard my movements too much. If you feel like sleep, one of you had better take a short siesta while the other keeps guard. I shall be back before daybreak."

So saying Benito took his lasso from the cantle of his saddle and silently left the camp.

It was almost daybreak when he returned, bearing upon his shoulders the best parts of a fat young buck. In the camp, during his absence, there had been no alarm, and with his return preparations for breakfast were got under way.

The epicures of the great cities of the world spend a small fortune for a single meal, and

still know not the pleasure of an appetite that can enjoy it.

The free air of the plains, the refreshing sleep on mother earth, the excitement of the chase, each a natural tonic, keep the stomach of a prairie ranger in that healthy condition to enjoy and partake of such a quantity as would give ample grounds for calling him a gourmand were he in the settlements.

The quantity of venison our friends caused to disappear certainly ought to have fitted them to follow the trail for some length of time without showing fatigue.

"I have left a large quantity of venison on the coals, senoritos," said Benito, "a part of which you can pack in your malettos. That, with the barbecued beef and hard corn-cakes, must last us perhaps for a long time. We know not how far this trail of the Apaches may lead us, or when we may, with safety, make another fire."

"You are very thoughtful," said Bob. "And now may I ask how you captured this buck?"

"Certainly. You ought to ask an explanation of all things you do not understand. I secreted myself in a thick mass of branches just over a deer-path, along which I knew the animals were in the habit of passing to water. I had my lasso ready to drop the noose over the head of the first one to appear, the end being secured to a stout limb. Of course I had to take into consideration the way the breeze was blowing, so that the deer would not get my scent. The chance came, as I expected. I dropped my lasso over the antlers of the leader, sprung down, cut his throat, and that ended the job. However, Senor Rocky, previous to laying for the buck, I traced up the trail to the big herd, so that we need not trouble ourselves until we arrive at that point."

"Just like yer, leetle pard," said the old scout, as he swallowed the last of his coffee.

"Now I'll light my old corn-cob an hev a smoke az we glides toward ther bend. Tobacco can't be burned arter this, on this trail, an' I'll be fightin' mad wi'out a smoke—which way o' feelin' 'll come in hunk 'bout ther time we strike ther trail, an' kin smell Injuns on ther breeze. Now saddle up, pards, an' scoot."

The scout threw his saddle on his horse, and in less time than it would take to describe it all were equipped for the trail.

"All set?" inquired Old Rocky.

"All ready!" responded the boys.

"Buena! Vamos!" ordered Benito, in a lively tone, and spurred his horse away at an easy lope, followed by the rest.

CHAPTER IX.

A RED-SKIN'S WOOING—THE ROSE OF THE FRIO.

SOON after reaching the point to which Benito had gone during his still hunt of the early morning it was found that the Apache trail could be followed at an easy lope without any trouble. As the magua plant grew in many places along the route the Indians, being very fond of the pith of the flower stem had gathered many of them as they rode along, and as they chewed the pith ejected the cud on all sides. These cuds, being white, were easily seen, and not only made plain "sign," but satisfied Old Rocky and Benito that a larger war-party was up the river. Otherwise those they were following would have used more caution about the trail.

So rapid was their progress that long before noon the four found it necessary to follow the river within the bottom timber, where they were screened from view, and at last they were forced to halt and await the cover of darkness as the yells of the braves who were driving the stolen animals came plainly to their ears.

As the shadows of evening darkened the timber they proceeded up-stream as far as the old scout thought it advisable to take the animals. Then, slipping the bridles, each horse was secured within a small opening with loose lariat enough to allow him to feed, Bob and Green were then posted in a thicket from which they could observe the stock, with strict orders not to leave their position under any circumstances, while Benito and Old Rocky started through timber and brush to spy on the Apache camp.

A half hour of silent groping and crawling through brush brought them within hearing of the occasional snort of mustangs, and the smell of burning wood, and as it was quite dark they could distinctly see the light from the camp-fires shining upon the trees ahead.

Worming their bodies snake-like along, using great care not to crack a stick or rustle a bough, side by side the two penetrated a dense thicket of bushes which bordered one side of the opening in which was located the Apache camp.

Accustomed as they were to keeping their feelings under control, it was with difficulty that the two suppressed an exclamation at the sight before them. Benito, indeed, ground his teeth together in his rage so that the sound was distinctly heard by Old Rocky, who lifted his hand with a warning gesture.

Not twenty paces away lay Col. Granger, bound to stakes driven into the ground, his arms and limbs extended in a painful position, his white hair soiled with blood and earth, and his upturned features showing ghastly as those of a corpse in the moonlight.

This was nothing more than they expected. That which affected them the most was the sight of a golden-haired girl, bound to a stake, standing upright over the form of the suffering man. The stake to which the girl was bound being driven at the feet of her father, each was thus forced to witness the sufferings of the other. The long, golden hair of the maid hung down to her waist, and her head being bowed her tresses completely veiled her face, but her small, delicate hands and arms, her slender, graceful figure, clad in a costume now torn almost to shreds by contact with thorny bush and branch, showed plainly to the observers that her features must be fair to view, and that she who was before them in such wretched plight and deadly peril was of no mean station in life.

The watchers knew that she must be the writer of the note which Benito had found, and that the white-haired man was her father. Both Benito and Old Rocky were forced to rub the moisture from their eyes before they allowed their gaze, heretofore fixed upon the captives, to wander about the camp, to take an inventory of the strength of their foes and the advantages of position of which they might avail themselves in case they entered for the purpose of rescuing the man and maid.

There were four fires burning and but fifteen braves in sight.

One of these, the chief, was a tall, fine-looking man; too symmetrical, indeed, to be an Apache, and his light, olive skin, his well rounded form and graceful movements suggested that he was of Mexican parentage. Probably he had been taken captive in childhood, and having been adopted into the tribe had won his way up by skill and daring.

He wore buckskin leggins, embroidered with beads, and confined at the waist by a wide belt made from the skin of a rattlesnake, a necklace of rattles taken from the same deadly serpent hung about his neck, while an exact representation of the same dreaded reptile, coiled for a spring, painted in vermilion, ornamented his breast. Two eagle-plumes, torn and bent, hung drooping from a beaded band which confined his long black hair.

The Indians had slaughtered one of the captured horses, and this being the first time since entering the settlements that they had felt secure from an attack, or could eat to their satisfaction, they had been gorging themselves according to the manner of the race after long abstinence. While Benito and his friend gazed the chief arose from the feast and approached the captives.

With arms folded, and in a voice intended to be kindly, he addressed the weeping girl.

"Why does Rose of Frio cry like the young squaw when warrior no come back from war-path? Why her head bow like broken reed when north wind howls? Look! Rattlesnake, the great chief of Apaches, speaks. His words are sweet, and his voice is not like the roar of the buffalo bull. He is speaking to Rose of Frio with soft words. His heart is full of love. His lodge, away beyond the Pecos, is empty: Rose of Frio is fair as prairie-flowers, her step like the young deer. The war-cry of Rattlesnake is heard before his knife leaves sheath; he is a great brave; he has many horses. Let the Rose say that she will go to his lodge; let her say that she will be his squaw; then flowers look bright, birds sing sweet, she will be free."

The bowed head moved not, and no answer came from the young girl.

With a grunt of impatience, Rattlesnake drew his scalping-knife and quickly severed the cords which bound her to the stake. Exhausted as she was the poor girl could no longer stand, and would have fallen had not the chief thrown his arm around her to sustain her.

At an order from him one of his braves brought a gourd of water, which he pressed to her lips, and then poured some of the cool contents upon her forehead.

Her form, meantime, reclined on his brawny, hideously-painted breast, her golden hair hanging over his arm as he bent one knee to the earth, a look of deep solicitude showing through

the thick streaks of vermilion that bedaubed his face.

From the lips of the half-conscious Colonel Granger there burst a low moan.

At the sound a low gasp, a cry like that of a frightened child, sprang from Jennie's lips. Her eyelids quivered, then her blue eyes opened, and with a shriek of terror she sprang from the arms of Rattlesnake, and stood by her father's side, trembling with fear and weakness.

The chief drew himself up, and gazed with admiration at the lovely figure before him.

"Let Rose of Frio speak; Rattlesnake's ears are open. Let her say she will go to his lodge, she be his squaw, north winds shall not blow on her,—she shall dress in the skins of the fawn.—Flowers shall grow on her trail. Let Rose of Frio say yes, Rattlesnake tie her up no more."

Lower and lower sunk the girl upon her knees, until her lips touched those of her father, while her golden tresses mingled with his white, blood-stained locks.

"Let Rose of Frio speak. Will she be squaw of Rattlesnake; or will she be tied to stake? Will she see her padre die of torture?"

The chief spoke impatiently now. Her speechless agony began to anger him.

Clasping her hands above her head Jennie Granger, with tear-moistened cheeks turned upward, gazed at the Apache with a supplicating glance that would have melted a heart of stone, and, with a terrible effort recovering her voice, spoke after the figurative manner that he himself had used:

"Do the sweet singing birds of the prairie mate with the soaring eagle? Can the fawn love the wolf that has it in his jaws? Why does the Rattlesnake sting those who have not disturbed him in his haunts? Cut loose my father and let me minister to his wants. Then I may think you worthy to be a chief among your people; and not a growling bear who tears up those who have never harmed him. Cut my father's bonds and the Great Spirit will smile upon you. You must know that he cannot escape, and that his daughter would die before she would leave him a captive among your merciless braves."

"Rose of the Frio speaks not with a forked tongue. Her words are now more soft and sweet than they were a sleep ago. Before moon grows small she will be glad to go into the lodge of Rattlesnake. She will be proud to be his squaw."

Regardless of the low grunts of disapprobation from the braves who had gathered near the captives, the chief stooped and severed the cords which bound Colonel Granger. Then, turning to the warriors, he added in a voice of thunder:

"Are my braves fools that they think the young squaw will leave her padre. White Hair is a mustang whose ham-strings have been cut with a lance. He cannot walk. Let your eyes be open. Many of our braves have fallen but the yells of the rancho and White Hair shall fill your ears like sweet music when torture fire burns in the Apache Valley."

The warriors dispersed, and Rattlesnake seated himself a short distance away, watching the captives while he puffed lazily away at a cigarette.

Pouring the remnant of the water in the gourd on her father's head, Jennie chafed his temples for awhile, in a tender, soothing manner. Then, with tottering steps she proceeded to the river, some twenty paces distant, passing through the dense thicket that lay along the water's edge. Returning with refilled gourd she bathed her own wrists and ankles, as well as those of her father, giving to the latter, from time to time, a sip or two of the refreshing water.

The chief sprang to his feet and brought with his own hand, on a large green leaf, some delicate portions of meat that he had reserved, and laid them down upon the grass by the captive, then returning to his former position.

All this Benito and old Rocky had seen, and noticing that Jennie Granger had not been followed when she went to the river, they immediately wormed themselves from their position, and crawled around through the underbrush to the point where she had dipped up the water. They hoped that some lucky chance might give them the opportunity to warn her that they were working for the rescue of herself and father—for they knew that they could not take the one without the other.

They were not mistaken when they thought she might return to the stream to refill the gourd. Soon she staggered through the brush.

It was a delicate piece of business that they now had in hand. In her nervous state, when

they revealed themselves, she might scream and bring the war-party down on them. Yet the risk had to be run.

Gripping their pistols, ready to fight for their lives should she give the alarm, Benito and old Rocky awaited in the brush until she had stooped and dipped the gourd beneath the surface of the river.

Benito breathed a low "hist," and then whispered her name.

"Gracious heavens! who speaks?" responded the girl in a low, husky voice.

"Git back to camp speedy, lee! le gal, whispered old Rocky hurriedly. We're on ther watch ter help yer, an' we don't kalkerlate ter quit ther trail until we hez gotten yer outen ther scrape. Yer dad ain't goin' to be left abind, neither. Git quick, er ye'll spile our game."

She understood the necessity of this, and at once hastened away without lingering for useless questions, while the two men, after listening to make sure that no suspicion had been awakened in the minds of the savages, withdrew as silently as they had come, and made their way back to the spot where they had left the two boys, whom they found safe but anxious.

"Now," exclaimed Old Rocky, as he and Benito seated themselves under the trees, "we've had a talk wi' ther purtiest leetle gal in Texas, an' one as haz as much bed-rock sense as ther best ov 'em."

Bob and Green heard this announcement with surprise, and the latter exclaimed, in astonishment:

"Why, then, did you not bring her along?"

"Because she are true grit, an' too white ter levan wi'out ther ole man, her dad. We see'd that from her ackshuns when we war on ther peep frum ther brush. Benito, ole pard, what sort o' a plan is yer hatchin' in yer brain-box?"

"I am puzzled," answered the horse-breaker.

"I would take my mustang, make a dash into the camp, and lose my hair or bring her out safe if it was not for the old man. How we are to work the thing I can't see yet; but we must think of a plan. I would lay down my life to serve her and gain one smile from her sweet lips."

"And so would I, though I have never seen her," broke in Bob. "I could never willingly see a white, and that a woman, in the power of any such hideous creature as that Apache we shot down the trail."

"Yer'll hev a chance ter shoot a heap more on 'em, jist as beautiful as he war," said Old Rocky. "I'm a-thinkin' o' a plan what's despr'it, an' mought not work, but are wuth tryin'. Yer see the wust part o' ther bizness ter be thunk ov are that ther gal an' ole man's stiff an' sore, an' can't be rug thr'u' ther bush permiskus like. Ef we c'd draw ther best part o' ther reds outen ther camp thar mought be a chance ter do s'uthin'."

"Hold!" exclaimed Benito, springing to his feet. "I have a plan which I am bound to make work. Their horses are two hundred yards to the west of the camp, and they will have the strongest guard there. I will agree to get Jennie Granger and her father to a place of safety if you three will work up a stampede."

"Duz yer think yer kin make ther rifle, leetle pard?"

"I am sure of it," returned Benito.

"Ah, younkers, duz yer think yer kin go inter hullsale biz with ther old man, and not miss fire?"

"We are ready to try!" answered the two boys, speaking together.

"Waal, then, we'd better cache our rifles in ther bush, fur we can't git thru' with them in the darkness without rattlin' ther branches; an' the work ahead hez got to be did mostly on the sly."

"I shall not take my rifle," affirmed Benito, "as it would be impossible to accomplish anything with it. I intend to do all my work with knife and rope, and I shall have to borrow your extra lariat, old pard."

"All right, yer kin have it; but I sw'ar I can't git through my head what yer calkerlates ter do wi' it. Howsumever I won't ax no quest-shuns; an' 'll 'low yer ter boss yer own job."

"Remember," said Benito as he secured the two lariats to his belt, and paying no attention to the remark, "if I give three sharp coyote barks, in quick succession I am anxious for you to draw attention toward the horses, and if I hoot three times like an owl you'll know I am successful, and coming to your aid. Now, if you three will catch a few winks of sleep I will keep guard, for we do not wish to start this thing until the last watch, two hours before daylight."

"Right, every time!" agreed the old scout.

"I'll take about forty ov them winks meself an' then yer kin turn me over, an' I'll peep 'round ther bottom while yer slumbers. We'll let ther boys snore it off while they kin."

The old man lost no time, but lay back on the dry leaves and was soon sleeping profoundly.

Not so with Bob and Green. They could not close their eyes, knowing that the war-party of Apaches was so near, and finally prevailed upon Benito to allow them to keep guard, the brokaro accepting them more readily since he knew by the manner of the two boys that it would be impossible for them to sleep.

CHAPTER X.

THE SACKING OF THE GRANGER RANCH—SINGLE EYE, THE SCOUT.

WHATEVER may have been the anticipations and designs of Benito and Old Rocky, there were complications of which they had no suspicion, and to explain them it will be necessary to take the reader back to the very night on which Benito, the brokaro, was introduced, leaning against a pecan tree amid the bottom timber of the San Antonio river.

At that same hour Colonel Granger and his daughter were seated opposite their log cabin, also wrapped in admiration as they gazed at the golden sky and its reflection upon the slow gliding waters of the Rio Frio.

Colonel Granger was one who had grown old and gray through thought and trouble. The loss of his fondly-loved wife upon giving birth to a daughter was his one great never-to-be-forgotten trouble, though in other ways fortune seemed to have struck him hard. That babe was now a maiden of sixteen, and in face, form and mind was fitted to queen it in any circle.

Not six months had passed since James Granger had sold out his plantation on Red river, which had been heavily mortgaged, and brought his daughter, his only loving, loved one, to this far-off frontier home. Having been reared to a life of ease and luxury, and having the tastes of scholar rather than those of a business man, he had neglected his affairs, leaving them entirely to an agent, who had defrauded him for years, and decamped with every cent he could realize when he found he could no longer conceal his heavy defalcations.

The perfidy of the man whom he had so implicitly trusted worked upon the mind of James Granger until he resolved to retire from civilization with the little remnant of his fortune and establish a home in the wilderness away from his kind, there to enjoy his books, nature and the companionship of his daughter, whom the old man loved as the apple of his eye.

Having given Jennie a perfect education, he doubtless thought, his selfish feelings swaying him thoroughly, that he was doing no wrong in isolating her, in the bloom of her youth, from the gay world and bringing her to this little two-roomed cabin, which, well furnished though it might be, was little better than a prison to a fresh young soul.

Yet Jennie Granger had vague longings rather than vain regrets, and this balmy evening she and her father were pictures of contentment as they sat upon the little veranda that faced to the south-west.

Before them lay the bottom timber of the Rio Frio, stretching open westerly and easterly like a huge green snake upon the prairie, the point nearest to the cabin being not a pistol-shot away. In fact the scattering post-oaks grew quite up to the building, which was almost entirely covered with creeping vines and flowers of every hue.

Directly to the west was a huge corral—for Mr. Granger had invested his capital in stock and had employed two Mexican herders, who lived in a smaller cabin, near the corral, and within the darker shadows of the timber.

To the north stretched a vast prairie, correspondent to another broad plain that lay upon the opposite bank of the river.

At sundown the two heard the Mexican herders driving the stock into the corral—for being on the frontier, exposed to the danger of Indian attacks, the cattle were not left upon the prairie during the night. After that all was silence, and the two sat conversing in a low tone, as the shadows deepened.

But suddenly father and daughter sprang to their feet in an agony of apprehension, for from the direction of the corral there arose the blood-curdling yell of the Apaches, mingled with wild screams for mercy, uttered in the Spanish tongue, a few shots, shrieks of agony, death yells, the dull thundering sound of stampeding cattle; and then, again, a silence, though this time horrible, accursed, brooded around.

Chilled, shocked, dismayed, yet not altogether

stunned, the two sprung within the cabin, and bolting their doors caught up their weapons, Colonel Granger seizing a carbine, while Jennie handled the little, gold-mounted rifle which, thanks to her father's forethought, she could use with deadly precision.

"Father, what do you see?"

She whispered the words anxiously to Colonel Granger, who was gazing through a loop-hole which commanded the view toward the corral.

"I see nothing but darkness, daughter; but the moon will soon throw its light on the scene. Ah, me! I fear we are doomed. I care not for myself; but that my selfishness should have dragged you into the path of such a fate breaks my heart. It seems as though there is not a chance. Yet all remains quiet. The savages may be in ignorance of the location of our cabin, and thanks to your love of flowers the vines may hide it from view. They may think that the herders' cabin is the only dwelling about the corral. This is our only hope, and God grant that it may not fail us."

"Can we not defend the cabin until Pedro or Antoine bring assistance?"

"Alas, Jennie, Pedro and Antoine are both dead. Their screams of agony fill my ears, and will while I live. But look! Great God! I feared as much. The fiends have fired the herders' cabin, and the painted demons are dancing in the firelight."

Higher shot the flames, illuminating the bottom timber and the corral, and showing plainly the faces of the dancing demons.

Several warriors, who had been in stooping postures, now arose, and amid exultant yells bound the dead, scalped bodies of the two Mexicans to the burning cabin, one on each side of the door. Then they leaped back and joined the circling, yelling horde.

"But, father, must we remain here? Perhaps the house is not altogether surrounded, and we might yet make our escape."

"Heaven only knows, we may try, though it seems like running from one danger to face a thousand. But, hark! Something or some one is in our cabin."

A prolonged hiss, like that of a snake, struck his ear.

But he was slightly mistaken, as he knew in a moment, for he heard the voice of some one speaking through a loophole in the rear of the cabin.

"Jist ez I s'posed. Strangers, I ain't a snake ef I duz hiss when I give warnin'. I war passin' by an' see'd ther 'Paches war givin' yer a s'prise party, so I thort I'd drop in, jist fur company."

"Thank Heaven! we have help, my prayers are answered!"

To the back door sprung Colonel Granger; on unbarring it he admitted the man, whose voice had rung in the darkness with such an honest twang. He had the pure Texas style of expression also, which fact alone would proclaim him a friend to them and a foe to the red fiends, whose yells were still ringing through the bottom timber.

The colonel gave him a hearty shake of the hand, as he entered.

"Your coming in this direction is most fortunate for us, and I only hope that it may not result in harm to yourself. We are cut off from our horses, and are unused to the ways of the savages. Do you think they will attack the cabin?"

"Waal, stranger, I rec'ons they will, directly, an' kin a-b'illin' fur blud; kinder sing'ler they h'aint afore this. Are yer darter with yer?"

"Yes, sir; but how did you know that I had a daughter? Have you been here before?"

"Rec'ons I hev," answered the stranger, as he struck a light and ignited a small tube of bark, which he held over his head an instant, taking with it a lightning view of the cabin and its occupants, and then stamped out.

"Yer darter, here, give me some medicine about a moon ago, when I war sick, an' sung a song ter me what's bin in my ears night an' day sin' that time. Yer war a-flutterin' round ther bottom fur bugs, an' I, bein' orle ockard in company scooted afore yer arrove. Duzn't yer member me, leetle one?"

"Indeed I do!" answered Jennie in a hopeful tone.

"Ef ther red cusses scarifies me, takes my ha'r off, an' cuts me inter gibblits I ar' goin' to keep 'em offen you, leetle one. Fact ar' Ise hankerin' ter exkoryate a few o' ther bethun, an' I rec'ons atween we-uns tha'll cum off 'bout second wust."

"May I ask your name, and if you reside near here?" asked Colonel Granger, moved by a natural curiosity, for this man seemed to be born to the border, and well worth knowing.

"My handle ar' Single Eye, an' I lives wher I happen ter take a sot down," answered the old scout.

The old settler at once remembered him by report as a noted Indian-fighter, who had gained his sobriquet through having but one eye. With the knowledge that such a man was by his side, to help in the defense of his home, he gained renewed hope.

"Now, kinder 'low me ter squint outer thet hole," continued Single Eye. "You kin talk ter yer leetle gal, an' encourage her. I ain't no slouch on ther spy ef I hezn't but one peeper to my face."

Without hesitation Colonel Granger resigned his place, and Single Eye gave a long and earnest gaze at the party surrounding the herders' cabin.

"The cusses ar' a-gittin' over thar festiveness, an' sum o' them ar' scootin' arter them loose saddle-bags, what ar' scared an' squeelin'. Lawd a mighty! Thet ar' awdashus luck! One o' ther ponies, a white one, ar' comin' this 'er ways!"

With a cry of joy Jennie, who did not realize how this increased the danger of discovery, sprung to the side of Single Eye.

"Oh, that is my pet pony. He knows I am here, and being frightened comes to me for protection."

"He'd better a danged sight not knowed so much," growled the scout, as the whinny of the pony sounded at the door, and an Indian galloped in pursuit to within ten yards of the cabin, where he brought his horse to a sudden halt and gazed in surprise at the vine-clad log cabin.

One instant the warrior gazed, then there was a crack of a rifle, and with a gurgling death-yell on his lips the Indian fell to the earth a corpse, while his mustang sprung away with a snort, and galloped toward the war-party, now getting ready to mount.

Hardly had Single Eye pulled the trigger when he sprung to the door, and pushing back the bolts, threw it open to admit the entrance of the white pony, which, at a cry from Jennie, rushed in.

At once the scout closed the door and shot the bolts, just as a loud, ringing war-cry from a score of throats, and the quick clatter of many hoofs sounded without. The Indians, having heard the rifle-crack and the death-cry, galloped toward the spot.

"Now ar' yer time, kurnel, ter show yer meuns bizness. You an' ther leetle one take a pop at ther crowd o' rollickin' smoky-skins o' Satan, when they arrive whar ther cuss dropped that I sent on ther long dark trail. But mind what I tells yer, kurnel. Jist az soon az we hez slung ther lead to 'em, pitch a saddle on ther nag, put yer leetle gal on, an' git up an' git outen ther back door, keepin' ther cabin atween yer an' ther red-skins. Do it afore they scatters 'round or yer chance ar' gone. I'll give 'em music ter keep 'em lively fur awhile, then scoot an' jine yer."

"But—" "I wants no buts, kurnel. Yer can't butt ag'in' them red ha'r-tarers long. I know 'em from h'ar ter heels. Ther leetle one hed better be dead than corraled by them. Don't be squeemish 'bout givin' them pills. Ready, now, an' let 'em have 'em!"

There was no more hesitation now. The three rifles spoke as one, their report being followed by yells of agony, and war-cries, and trampling and snorting of mustangs as the Indians dashed to cover, leaving three of their number dead or dying.

Driven to shelter now by the sudden and unexpected volley from a point which, in the uncertain light seemed a motte of bushes and vines, the Apaches soon rallied and securing their horses to trees, prepared for an assault.

Those in the cabin were not idle. The scout hurried on the execution of his plan.

"God bless you, my friend," said Colonel Granger. "It is cowardly to leave you; but you should know best what is to be done. May heaven guard you and bring you to us quickly."

"Git!" said Single Eye tersely, and he swung open the back door, slapping the white pony on the hams, while Colonel Granger, holding his rifle in one hand and grasping the reins with the other led out the animal on which Jennie was already mounted.

Single Eye followed out and saw that they took the right direction, among the post oaks. Then, instead of re-entering the house he ensconced himself among the vines, and placing his rifle where it could be easily grasped he drew his revolvers.

Meantime the Apaches were creeping forward

like snakes in the grass, and had approached to within a short distance of the door when they were filled with surprise by a loud yell from one of the guards left with the captured horses.

The sound brought them to their feet in amazement, and at that instant Single Eye, sounding his own well-known and dreaded war cry, opened fire with a revolver in either hand. In rapid succession he rattled a dozen shots, and then sprung around the cabin as bullets and arrows flew thickly about his recent place of hiding. With a pandemonium of yells filling his ears Single Eye, slinging his rifle, ran fleetly toward the point at which he hoped to join the colonel and his daughter.

The rattling discharge of revolver shots killed and wounded many of the Apaches; but the remainder, with the exception of three who were ordered to follow Single Eye on foot, sprung for their horses; but before they could reach them and mount a part of the guard from the corral had broken away at a break-neck gallop. These not only were speeding after the scout, but they had in view, also, the colonel and his daughter.

Single Eye, on the run, reloaded his revolvers and thrust them back into their scabbards and unslung his rifle, just as the panting of an Apache sounded behind him. Giving a side glance, the scout slackened his pace, feigning to be fagged, and sprung to the right just as the knife of the Indian was cleaving the air. Then he brought his heavy stock down with a dull crunch upon the warrior's skull.

Not ten paces behind came another brave, whose arrow scratched the cheek of the scout as the latter leveled his rifle.

Another death yell sounded on the night air, and the third Apache stopped, appalled by the sudden death of the two who preceded him. His mounted comrades were coming fast, but meantime Single Eye dashed on and was soon within ear-shot of the colonel.

"Save yerself, Sunshine!" shouted the scout. "Kurnel, give ther pony a crack w' yer rifle. Tain't no use. We can't git 'way from ther cusses ef we stick together. You streak to ther north an' I'll glide south an' try an' cut ther party."

Colonel Granger drew his daughter's hand to his lips, and then, with a "Good-by, darling! God protect you!" he struck the pony a violent blow with his rifle, regardless of the cries of his daughter.

"I cannot, will not leave you!" she exclaimed; but the pony, frightened by the wild yells of the fast-approaching Indians, and the blow that it had received, sprung away over the plains.

With a glance Single Eye saw that he could at present do nothing more for his friends, and now he turned toward a dry gully, which he knew was near. He believed that the capture of Colonel Granger was almost certain, but that if he could gain the concealment of the river bank he might yet assist Granger to escape, or, by regaining his own horse, aid the golden-haired maiden whom he called Sunshine, should she be so fortunate as to elude present capture.

At the edge of the gully Single Eye paused and looked around.

At that moment Colonel Granger was being tied to a mustang by his captors, while further on to the north the white pony, bearing Jennie, scurried over the plains, a dozen Indians in swift pursuit.

But the scout had little time for thought or regrets, for the mounted Apaches were coming toward him like a whirlwind, and the "zip" of a rifle-ball, dangerously near to his ear, warned him that he had no time to waste, while he knew it would be madness for him to attempt to fight so long as he could run. However much damage he might do, death or wounds and capture would certainly be his.

Accordingly, Single Eye sprang into the gully and ran with all his speed down its bed toward the river.

The winding course of the wash-out made it a long run for the old man, but the wild yells in his rear kept him from faltering in his pace, and also tended to make him think that Jennie Granger had been captured, else the Apaches could not have spared the braves that were in pursuit of him.

Just before reaching the river, when in the midst of the timber of the bottom, Single Eye cast his ammunition pouch into a hollow tree, which overhung his course, and then, reaching the bank, he cast his rifle into the stream, plunged in himself, and swam under water to the other side.

Then he came up under the shelving bank, overhung so thickly by vines and reeds that he was entirely screened from view.

Never had the old scout come much nearer to capture. He had not been in position a moment before the Apaches came crashing through the brush on either side of the gully, filling the timber with yells of disappointed rage as they saw that the much dreaded scout had again escaped them.

The rippling water told no tales.

Meantime how was it faring with Jennie Granger?

When her father struck the blow that sent her pony speeding away, hope failed and courage left her. She dared not look back lest she should see her father stricken down by the howling fiends, and disregarding the fact impressed upon her by Single Eye that her fate, if captured, would be worse than death, she strove with all her power to guide her pony back to the side of her loved father.

But the pony no longer obeyed its gentle mistress. The yelling horde had frightened the animal beyond control, and on, on, at break-neck speed sprung the panting animal bearing Jennie Granger.

Yet the clattering hoofs and frightful whoops sounded nearer and nearer, until the very panting of the pursuing mustangs came plainly to her ears. Then the heads of snorting mustangs appeared on either side, and red hands roughly grasped her arms. Sunshine was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XI.

WAR WITH THE KNIFE.

"Ef I ain't ther wust kerral'd human on ther 'rrio I hope ter be nibbled ter de'th by cat-fish!" soliloquized Single Eye, as he lay soaking under the river bank after the Indians had given up their search for him.

"I duzzn't 'low ter play alligator but a few flectin' periods, er I'll lose ther rest o' ther show, an' not know whether Sunshine an' ther ole tug-hunter hez bin wiped out er tuck to'ards the Pecos. One thing ar' dead sure—the pesky red blud-suckers won't linger this-aways, but'll glide off speedy fur fear o' my fotchin' a party arter 'em. Fer this same reason they won't be apt ter leave a cuss ter watch my jumpin'-off place, thinkin' I hez scooted down-crick. I rec'ons I'll jist glide 'cross, easy-like, an' prospect on t'other side o' the drink."

Bracing his feet against the bank the old scout gave a swift, strong plunge under water, and swam across the river, coming up only when near to the opposite shore. With the exception of a slight wave, caused by his dive beneath the water, and which might have been caused by one of the huge cat-fish that were plentiful in the stream, he had given no grounds for any watching enemy to suspect his presence.

Resting but a moment, Single Eye drew himself cautiously up into the water-wash which had been the avenue of his escape from the Apaches. There was no sign of the presence of a foe, yet Single Eye was distrustful. The very silence, after such a pandemonium of yells, was suspicious. Knowing well the ground, the scout believed that if a sentinel had been posted at all it would be on the left side of the gully, which was the nearest to the Granger ranch. Drawing his bowie-knife and placing the blade between his teeth, he silently made his way up the bank of the wash-out until he reached the fringe of brush upon the top of the bank.

Then, by good fortune, he happened directly on a bear path, which here wound along the edge of the gully, leading through the bushes toward the river at the very place he wished to penetrate.

Crawling carefully Single Eye soon came from out the thicket, into the towering bottom timber, which was nearly clean from undergrowth, and here and there lighted by streaks of moonlight which filtered through the branches above.

Not twenty feet away ran the river; and between the scout and the stream, leaning against the trunk of a pecan tree, an Apache brave, with bow in hand and arrow between fingers, watched intently the river below at the point where the wash-out broke the irregularity of the bank.

Doubtless the sentinel had but lately come upon the scene, for those who had pursued the scout down the gully had all been mounted, and no horse was now in view.

Thus, at least, reasoned Single Eye, as with a step light as that of a panther he glided toward the pecan tree, the trunk of which shielded him from view.

The crack of a stick, even the rustle of a dry leaf, might have defeated his plan; for the warrior was a perfect model of strength.

As Single Eye reached the tree-trunk he suppressed his breath, and gathering all his strength

sprung around the tree, upon the Apache, around whose neck he threw his left arm, drawing the head of the red-man down against his breast, pressing against his jaw upward, to prevent a signal yell from being given.

At the same instant he drove his bowie-knife into the breast of the savage foe.

But quick as thought the Apache threw up his arm, warding off the blow before the steel had reached a vital point, and then squirming around like a snake he dropped bow and arrows and being unable to draw his scalping-knife he grappled with the old scout.

One moment these powerful forms swayed back and forth, one moment intense hatred shot from eye to eye. Then, by a dextrous trip Single Eye threw his adversary to the earth, falling heavily upon him, and each still striving for the mastery they both rolled over the bank and sunk beneath the rippling river.

The next instant however they reappeared, the right hand of each grasping a knife, and the left hand clinging with a gripe of madness to the other.

Thus they remained for an instant, gliding slowly down the stream, until Single Eye, seeing that the warrior was filling his lungs to give a signal whoop, gave a dexterous, desperate turn of the knife in his hand, that brought the point strongly across the back of the hand that clasped his wrist.

At once the gripe of the savage loosened; and on the instant Single Eye buried his steel to the hilt in his breast, at the same time thrusting his head under the water. The struggle was over, and swimming once more to the shore the scout climbed up the bank, where he seated himself for a short season to recover his breath and strength.

After a little he arose, and having recovered his ammunition-pouch from where he had secreted it, and carefully wiped, dried and re-loaded his revolvers, he made his way out of the wash-out, and keeping just in the shade of the timber, approached the scene of the recent conflagration, near the corral.

The Apaches were clustered there in force, but Single Eye saw at a glance that they were preparing for a move. Inside of the corral were some forty horses, which he knew must have been mostly stolen down country, as Colonel Granger had owned but a few half-breeds, for herding purposes. Without, to his grief, and yet, somewhat, to his relief, he saw Colonel Granger and Jennie.

The wrists of the two prisoners were bound fast to their saddle-borns, and the appearance of the half dozen warriors who composed their body-guard showed that they were the select braves of the party.

No time was being lost, and the Apaches, evidently, had fears of pursuit. The scout had scarcely reached a position where he could view the scene, when all were on the move.

As the Apaches guarding his friends passed from sight, followed by the stolen horses, also under guard, Single Eye was greatly surprised to see another cavalcade of warriors, a score or more strong, approaching, and in their midst two white men, bound fast to mustangs.

That these men were rancheros was evident from their costume, and they had probably been captured further down the country by this party, which had arrived since the attack on the Granger ranch. There were also a number of Indians engaged in burying the dead, and Single Eye decided that not half of the braves he now knew were on the war-path had joined in the first attack.

Waiting patiently, he saw them all disappear save those who were looking after the dead; and now the scout, seeing that they, too, would soon be ready to leave, and that but little more was to be learned here, cautiously withdrew. He reasoned that the rear guard would not depart without taking up the sentinel posted at the gully; and he made his way back, taking up his position behind the very tree which had concealed the Apache brave who was now a drifting corpse on the river.

He had not long to wait. A step, hasty but cautious, approached, and a signal hiss darted impatiently through the bottom, followed by a silence that spoke of an apprehension of something wrong.

With pent breath and fast-gripped steel, Single Eye crouched ready to spring as the brave, with slow, silent steps, passed the tree and peered over into the river.

One bound and Single Eye, with upraised steel, stood at the warrior's back. One look of supreme astonishment from those snake-like eyes and then the knife crunched through bone and flesh, the Apache was hurled far out into the river, casting up a thousand moon-gilded

jewels of spray, while Single Eye muttered, as he wiped his bowie on the mossy bank:

"I'll hev a 'Pache sculp fur ev'ry tear that runs down leetle Sunshine's cheek."

Carefully scrutinizing every point, and seeing no indication of any one approaching, the scout struck once more into the bear-path, and soon sprung down into the gully. Here, removing his revolvers and sombrero he dove into the river, reappearing with his rifle.

"Rec'on I won't 'low my ole reliable ter soak thar no longer, fear o' them danged 'Paches freezin' to it. When I've wiped her out, an' git astraddle o' Skiplively ag'in, I'll be-fixed fur ther hull 'Pache nashun. He's a coon, thet ole hoss ar'; an' wouldn't squeal ef forty reds come 'thin forty foot on him."

With much care the scout dried his rifle, and then walked briskly down the river some three hundred yards. Then, penetrating a dense thicket by a mustang path, he came to a natural opening.

Giving a low, peculiar whistle he was greeted with a whinny of delight by a horse which, strange to say, like its master, had but one eye.

"Skiplively, ole pard, yer right thar every time, ain't yer? But I tell yer, since I left thar were a time when ther' war mighty slim chance fur yer ever tu lay that peeper on me ag'in. Ef ther 'Paches hed rubbed me out yer'd 'a' broke away, hunted up my corpus an' cried yer eye out, wouldn't yer, ole pard? Ye'd bin in a mighty tight fix, then, wouldn't yer? Hed ter smelt yer way."

The old scout gave a low laugh as he bridled the impatient steed, which rubbed its head fondly against its master's shoulder.

Making his way out from the thicket Single Eye once more approached the Granger ranch.

The moon shone clearly, showing that now there were no Indians around the herders' cabin, and keeping in a line with the other cabin he rode directly to the back door where he dismounted, and drawing one of his revolvers entered the flower-clad home of Sunshine.

Lighting as before a little tube of dry bark, the old scout glanced around the cabin, and much to his surprise saw that nothing seemed to have been removed. Pushing open the door that led to Jennie's room, he removed his sombrero and stepped inside. Here, too, nothing appeared to be disarranged. The bed was just as Sunshine had left it, and on it lay her little Bible.

The sight of the latter strangely affected Single Eye. He drew near and placed his broad hand upon it, sinking down upon his knees by the bedside, turning his eyes heavenward.

"I ain't used ter perlaverin' with, er troublin' yer, kase I'm a one-eyed, good-fur-nothin', ole cantankerous cuss, an' ain't fit; but I wants yer ter lissen just wunst. I swears ter foller ther red blud-suckers an' git Sunshine outen ther clutches, er bu'st! Hunger ner sparce drink ain't goin' ter budge me offen ther trail, an' I'll lay me bones out fur a kiote lunch er fetch back ther leetle rose az pure an' bloomin' az she war afore. Amen!"

The last words of his singular but earnest oath had but just left the mouth of the old scout as the cylinder of bark burned to his fingers, and as he dropped the stub to the floor he felt himself clutched from under the bed, the last glimmer of his little torch showing the painted face and brawny arms of an Apache.

CHAPTER XII.

SINGLE-EYE TO THE RESCUE—A NIGHT STAMPEDE.

TAKEN unawares, not thinking it possible for an enemy to be lurking behind, Single-Eye was, for an instant, almost helpless from amazement, but quickly he grappled with his assailant, who might ere this put him out of harm's way had he not had a burning desire to capture the scout alive, and so win more than double glory.

But powerful man though the savage was he had not made sufficient allowance for the strength and desperate skill of Single-Eye. The latter threw himself directly down upon him, and the two grappled and fought in a perfect frenzy of rage, rolling in their struggles from the bed-chamber to the main room, and from there, through the back door, into the open air, and under the very heels of Skiplively.

And here the Apache seemed to have all the best of it, for he was on top, and had succeeded in raising the hand which held his scalping-knife. He thought no more of capturing Single Eye, but poised his blade to stab him where he lay.

He felt sure of his triumph, too; and his hand quivered with a deliberate motion as he took aim for a deadly stroke.

Yet the hand did not fall.

With a sudden dart Skiplively seized the up-held wrist fairly between his stout jaws, and his teeth closed on the bones with a splintering, rending power. Then, like a dog worrying a rat he shook the helpless savage.

The diversion saved Single Eye. He slipped like an eel from under the Apache, and buried his own knife in the heart of the shrieking brave.

"Thar, Skiplively, shake!" exclaimed the scout, pausing from his exertion, and at once the horse dropped the quivering arm, and turned away with a snort, to meet the caressing hand that patted him softly on the head.

"Yer ther best piece o' hoss-flesh this side er ther Red—er t'other, either. It war a s'prise party, Skiplively, thet come danged nigh ter puttin' me other lamp out. Dog-goned ef yer kin tell what's comin' next, nohow: but I rec'ons our work here's 'bout did. It's time we wer on ther trail!"

Having scalped the Indian and dragged his body away some little distance, Single Eye closed the doors, mounted his horse and proceeded on his way, fording the stream below where the Apaches had crossed it, and finally reaching a spot where he could obtain a full view of the prairie which stretched away to the southward.

By this time the gray streaks of morning lit up the eastern sky, and greatly to his gratification the scout could plainly see, at some distance, a single Indian, returning from the main body, which was now a mere speck on the plain.

"Comin' ter see whar ther cusses be what I haz yeped out, ar' yer? Waal, I rec'ons I kin send yer on ther same trail, an' not half try."

Loosening an extra lasso from the cantle of his saddle Single Eye left Skiplively well-screened from view, and proceeded to the point where the Apaches had forded the river. Following the trail half-way through the bottom timber the old scout climbed up a tree, the branches of which hung directly over the path the brave would probably take.

Securing the end of the lasso to a limb, and gathering the slack, he adjusted the noose free and wide, and securely hidden in his leafy covert, awaited events.

Soon the tipity-tip of the mustang sounded on the dry, hard plain, and then the savage entered the bottom, coming directly along the trail, as Single Eye had hoped.

A sudden swish, a snort, a yell of agony, and away went the affrighted mustang, leaving its red master swinging in the air, the noose binding the Indian about the waist, with both arms held tightly to his side, and the rawhide rope cutting deeply into his flesh.

No doubt the Apache had undergone every torture, self-inflicted and otherwise, demanded by the savage rites of his tribe, before starting upon the war-path, and suffered them, too, with stoical indifference, but he had hardly felt such agony as this. His whole weight bearing upon the greased loop, tightened it until the breath was fairly pressed from his lungs, the blood ceased to circulate through his arms, and his eyes almost bulged from their sockets.

Giving the Indian a push, to extend the length of his swing, Single Eye, with a whoop of exultation sprung away through the timber, but soon returned, leading Skiplively, whom he planted in the path, facing the swaying Apache.

"Skiplively," said the scout, "I never 'lows nothin' ter slide past wuth squintin' at 'thout I gi'n yer a chance ter go one eye on ther show. This ar' a fust-class cirkiss I haz got up fer yer 'pecial benefit. But yer see, Skiplively, ther cuss ar' so dangedly sarprized ter see a one-eyed awgience cl'ar through, thet he's gittin' bashful an' wants ter draw outen ther game. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! He'd be willin' ter draw outen thet skin an' step 'round 'thout any ef he c'u'd git cl'ar o' this yere tight-rope performance!"

Still the Apache swung backward and forward, in silent agony; but in Single Eye there was little of mercy left.

"Look a-here, you knock-kneed, paint-berdaubed, greazy sun ov a mangy tick-chawed kite, yer kin arter yer cut-throat pards, an' danged ef yer cuzzn't hev ter foller ther same trail. Ef I war a sneakin', blud-suckin' 'Pache I'd 'low ver ter swing thar' till ther buzzards picked yer peepers out, ther kites hed nibbled yer toe-nails off, an' yer had lingered in ther die biz'ness till yer'd gi'n yer skulp an' forty hosses fur a ball through yer nozzle. I ain't quite them kind."

The Apache brave saw that his sufferings

would soon end, and began in a low, guttural tone to chant his death-song, its wailing notes in good keeping with the time of the slow swaying cord, the dark shadows and the somber, ghost-like draperies of hanging moss.

Single Eye ceased speaking and stepped in front of his horse, bowie in hand, coolly calculating his time and distance; with one sweep of his powerful arm he sent the keen weapon flying through the air toward the Apache, who, swinging forward to meet his death, received the steel in his heart.

When the last convulsive motion had been given Single Eye drew the knife from its fleshy socket and sprung into his saddle, muttering as he rode away:

"It ar' better ter lose a lasso than handle ther cantankerous cuss. Then, ag'in, ef anybody comes this-aways they'll know thet I'm on ther trail."

Out on the prairie once more the scout now followed the trail of the savages, and before he had galloped a mile he came to the conclusion that they had divided, one party heading directly for the Nueces river, while the other proceeded in a more westerly direction, undoubtedly intending to strike the same stream higher up.

Single Eye reasoned that both parties would unite at some time, and should they intend to torture the prisoners it would not be done until they all were again together.

A close examination decided almost positively that the two captive rancheros had been taken on the west trail, which, after some deliberation, Single Eye decided to follow. It seemed to him that he could more easily rescue them than Colonel Granger and Sunshine, and with their assistance he would be better able to save Sunshine and her father. Without a selfish motion in his heart, Single Eye sped away on his lone scout, resolved to brave the danger of torture and death in the hope of doing something for the Rose of the Frio, fair Jennie Granger.

When, after a wearisome ride of some days, Single Eye at last, near sundown, struck the Nueces, he allowed Skiplively to run at large in the bottom timber, while he examined every inch of ground on both sides of the stream.

He found no signs of any trail except that of the Apaches, made some three weeks before when they came down the river. From this trail he satisfied himself that when they left their villages there were at least sixty warriors in the party, though it numbered a score less now—that, so far, being their loss on the war-path.

What troubled him more was that there seemed to be no mustangers up the river, as he had hoped, so that his only hope for aid was that the Indians below would be discovered by some of the bands of whites who were often on the Nueces catching wild horses.

Satisfied as to this, Single Eye turned his attention to the camp of the one division of the Apaches, which he knew would be located not far from the river, and which he determined to visit. He rode slowly along the edge of the timber until the smell of smoke and scorched meat warned him that he was near the camp; and to his gratification he found that it was in a favorite spot of his own, with every crook, path, tree and thicket of which he was familiar.

By revolving in his mind the exact situation of the openings, he was able to locate the position of the sentinels, and once more leaving Skiplively, with a word of caution that the animal seemed to understand, he approached, under cover of the huge prickly-pears, a point in a mustang path where his labors would probably begin.

Taking advantage of the time when the moon was hidden by a passing cloud, he succeeded in crawling down this path; and when the moonlight returned he could see, as he more than half-expected, that an Apache sentinel was perched in the very tree under which he was lying. In anticipation, he had secured the end of his lariat to a small sapling, some thirty feet from the tree in which sat the Indian.

The lasso was tied some three feet from the ground, and drawn along by the side of the path.

Single Eye now gave the lariat a twitch, which caused the sapling to shake, the rustle of its leaves making quite a noise in the still night air.

The sentinel gave a low grunt of surprise; and at a second twitch and rustle he made a movement indicative of curiosity, which he followed up by stepping hastily to a limb below his perch.

The old scout gave an inward chuckle and a third twitch. Then he dropped the lariat, drew his bowie and awaited the result.

Down through the branches, hand under hand, came the Apache, until, swinging by the lower bough, he dropped directly into the arms of Single Eye, whose left hand pressed his mouth, smothering his death-yell as his right drove the bowie home.

Penetrating the timber a short distance with his dismal load, the old scout tore off the reeking scalp and left the body to stiffen, while he, securing his lariat, left the path, and crawling through the timber, entered the opening in which the animals were feeding.

Awaiting a moment when a cloud obscured the moon, he secured one end of his lariat to the leg of a mustang and gave a sweeping throw of the slack entirely over the animal's head and body. Then, by a quick jerk, as the horse stepped, he threw him violently to the ground, where he lay snorting and kicking.

Knowing that some of the mustangs were dragging their neck-ropes, the old scout made this movement thinking that if a sentinel was near he would imagine that the horses were entangled and would spring to the spot.

He was correct, for almost at once he heard a rustling of branches, and a warrior bounded toward him, on the run, to loosen the entangled animal.

Once more there was a smothered gasping, a writhing and twisting of two human forms, locked in a death-struggle, the sound of steel crashing through flesh and bone, the spurt of blood in the now bright moonlight, and then with a deep sigh of relief, the old scout threw another Apache into the deep shadows of the pecan trees. Confident now that his way was clear of watching eyes, he made his way swiftly through the intervening clumps of trees until at last he could peep through the branches into the heart of the camp.

By the dull glow of the smoldering fires the scattered forms of the Apaches could be easily discerned, while, in the torturing position once before described, lay the two rancheros.

Near by an Apache brave was walking back and forth in the moonlight, and as he passed the prisoners he gave them each a brutal kick.

The sight of this moved Single Eye more than one would have thought the well-seasoned scout could be moved, and he mentally vowed that not only should the two captives be liberated, but that the sentinel should feel the weight of his vengeance. It was true that any effort required a reckless bravery, but in that very fact lay the strongest chance for success. He did not wait, but moved at once to his work.

Noiselessly making his way around the border of the opening, passing within a few paces of the sleeping forms he found himself at the aimed-for goal—the spot where the camp equipments were piled together.

Still eluding the view of the sentinel, whose chief concern seemed to be to outrage and insult the prisoners, he drew from among the saddles a brilliantly colored poncho.

With this he crept back to his former position, choosing a point as far from the camp as he could and yet be visible, and when the Apache had turned in his walk he quickly hung the blanket, outspread, upon the bushes, running a thorn through the two upper corners.

By this arrangement he was securely hidden from view, and yet, through the slit in the poncho, he could observe the movements of the sentinel.

Once more the Indian turned, and he had walked back as far as the captives before he noticed that there was a change in the aspect of affairs.

The blanket, which he then saw, was a conspicuous object, and it certainly had not hung there a moment before; nor could it have got there without the assistance of human hands. To the sentinel it seemed that there was but one way to account for its strange appearance.

The comrade on guard over the animals had placed it there—perhaps to try him. If such was the case he would show that he was on the alert. Certainly he did not suppose that an enemy was within miles, much less that one had dared to penetrate thus far into the camp.

Without hesitation the Indian sprung over the two captives and advanced toward the curtain of death. Upward he reached his arm to loosen the corner of the poncho, but before his hands clasped the blanket the terrible bowie knife came driving through, deep into his breast, while the blanket was thrust over his head and shoulders, and pressed tightly upon his lips.

A convulsive tremor, a gurgling death-rattle, and all was over.

Lightly laying the blanket and corpse in the brush, Single Eye sprang to the side of the two Texans, who, alone, were awake, and whispered words of caution and hope in their ears, while he knelt on the sward and severed the cruel cords which had creased deeply into their flesh.

Fortunately they were men of nerve and experience, and though at first almost unable to move they knew how quietly to aid Single Eye to the extent of their powers. With some difficulty, one by one, he got them through the opening in which the mustangs were feeding, down to the river, by a path well known to him. Stiff, sore, broken down by hard usage and mental agony, the four men wept for joy as they bathed their wounds, and lapped the water from the river.

But Single Eye did not wait to receive their thanks. He had no time. He gave them a word of caution and left.

In a few moments he darted back. He had procured two rifles and ammunition and a huge chunk of horse-meat; which latter the Texans, who had been systematically starved, began to devour with gusto.

Again he disappeared; again came back.

This time he bade them follow; and leading them through the mustang path to the open prairie they found Skiplively and two saddled mustangs.

"Stan' right thar, pards, till I j'ines yer; an' that'll be before yer has time ter rub ther sleep outen both eyes. I hez allowed ter break up this 'Pache outfit, an' I'm goin' ter do it, er bu'st ther hull univarse."

Back went Single Eye, to the mustangs. His wonderful success, wonderful even for him, had emboldened him, so that no thought of possible failure entered his mind. He knew that the gorged Indians, trusting fully to their sentinels, would sleep soundly, and even if they awoke he had a safe line of retreat.

One by one he cut the hobbles of the mustangs and headed them for the prairie, by way of the mustang path. Perhaps one man in a thousand has the faculty of handling a strange horse, in the night, without a struggle. The old scout was one of those men who have that gift, and he worked it now to its full capacity, to the wonder of the Texans, who found that whatever they might have heretofore thought, they knew nothing about stampeding an Indian corral.

"Now, boys," he said, as the last of the mustangs had filed past and the scout had flung himself on Skiplively. "I've swept the stakes without showin' my hand, but I'm goin' now, ter sling me keards on the board. Drive 'em straight on, away from the river while I gives 'em a partin' clip."

The rancheros without question went on their way, while Single Eye, on Skiplively, again sought the Apache camp; but this time without the care that heretofore he had used. As he gained the edge of the opening he wheeled Skiplively and then gave utterance to his own peculiar war-yell.

Up sprang every Apache, but as their hideous, painted forms arose Single Eye's revolvers began a rattling fusillade.

Only for a moment did it last, for then the scout's heels struck the flanks of Skiplively, and along the mustang path bounded the one-eyed pair, with a horde of yelling braves upon their track: whose anger turned to fiendish madness when they broke out upon the plain and saw their two late captives and Single Eye galloping free in the moonlight, and their own mustangs bounding in a wild stampede before the three whites.

The drifting clouds had grown heavier and heavier, and now a storm appeared about to break but regardless of that, while a few kept straight on in pursuit, the main body turned straight down the river in a frantic run. Their object was to meet their comrades with the stolen horses, obtain mounts, and recapture their stampeded mustangs and wreak their vengeance on Single Eye and the rancheros, before they could pass beyond the Rio Leano.

But Single Eye had no intention of reaching the Leano. At some distance on the prairie he wheeled his cavalcade and drove down, parallel to the Nueces, intending to strike that stream once more, and this time below the party which held Colonel Granger and little Sunshine.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RESCUE AND A RECAPTURE—OLD FOES AND NEW DANGERS.

It is now time to return to Benito, Old Rocky, and the two boys.

At the very time that they were making pre-

parations to rescue Colonel Granger and Jennie, a long line of Apaches, maddened by the loss of mustangs and prisoners, was coming down the river, in a fast run, while Single Eye and the rancheros, with the stampeded corral, were not far away.

Of these facts, however, the four were utterly oblivious, and, accordingly, made their arrangements to, as they thought, suit the case. Their rifles were securely hidden, the horses were changed and secured to limbs in such a manner as to allow of their being instantly loosened, and Old Rocky, Bob and Green, after a hearty handshake with Benito, glided away in the darkness to make a circuit and reach the opposite side of the Apache camp.

Soon after Benito made his way silently to the point which he and the old scout had reached.

Perfect silence reigned in the Indian camp, and the fires had burned low. Only at intervals the moon shone brightly as the masses of drifting clouds broke away from before her face.

Benito was on the east side of the camp. The western portion of the opening was covered with the sleeping forms of the Apaches, and the south side was bordered by the towering bottom timber, which stood upon the river bank. These trees were covered with luxuriant vines and drooping moss.

Contrary to his expectation, or, rather, his hope, especially in regard to Jennie, the captives were again bound, in the same position as when first discovered, and an Apache brave stood near the stake to which the young girl was secured. The two were in the middle of the opening, while the guard stood near the branches of the bottom timber by the river.

The brokaro needed but a moment in which to inspect the camp. Crawling back out of the thicket he made his way, silently as a snake, to the river bank, and to the timber which bounded the Southern side of the camp, moving along the mossy sward, amid the soft bottom grass, until he was within five paces of the Apache sentinel, who was now lying prone upon the ground, with his ear pressed to the earth in an attitude of listening.

Benito quickly imitated the example of the Indian, and heard a distant, tremulous rumble, which told of a body of galloping mustangs. It could be naught else, for no buffalo came so far down country, and there was no stock, now, nearer than Fort Ewell.

It was a time for either a retreat or a quick movement, and the young brokaro did not hesitate. Rising, with one great spring he threw himself upon the outstretched form of the warrior, thrusting his sombrero into the mouth of the Apache as he buried his knife deep in his body.

Only waiting to see that life was extinct Benito leaped to the side of Jennie, cut the thongs which bound her wrists and ankles, and pressed a knife into her hand, whispering:

"Be silent. Friends are near who would die for you, but cut your father loose quickly or all is lost!"

Bewildered, half dazed by the joyful surprise Jennie fell upon her knees, and with rapid but trembling fingers cut her father free and assisted him to rise.

Hardly had she done so when Benito bounded back and lifting her in his arms, tenderly bore her under the towering trees to where there hung a lasso, which he had fixed to a limb above.

Aided by this he soon had his fair charge seated upon a limb some forty feet above the camp, and entirely screened by the festooned moss, even had it been bright daylight. With a whispered word of cheer he bound her securely to the limb, and then descended to aid her father to mount to the same perch.

As the colonel had suffered rougher handling than his daughter he was even more helpless, but the strength and skill of Benito aiding him he was soon upon a perch near to Jennie, securely bound in a safe position.

Panting from his exertions, Benito stood upon a limb below the pair, and once, even in that moment of intense anxiety, a thrill of strange joy ran through his frame, as he felt by chance her wandering fingers touch lightly the long, soft ringlets of his hair. Then, as a stream of moonlight came glinting from behind a moving cloud, their eyes met, those of the one filled with unbounded thankfulness, of the other something much like deep if dawning love.

But even as they looked, from up the river sounded a wild war-cry from many throats, that caused every one of the sleeping braves below to bound from his blanket, grasp his weapons

and give an answering yell, while Benito, utterly astonished at the turn of affairs, drew his revolvers and braced himself for coming fight. He dared not, now, give the agreed upon signal of success, though the attention of Rattlesnake and his followers was now wholly directed up the stream. For the time their captives were wholly forgotten.

And now the secret of the distant rumbling that the Indian sentinel had heard, was to be revealed.

The sounds of the stampede increased, as if it came above a depression of the prairie, and then, thundering down the decline toward the Apache camp, came a mass of snorting, terrified steeds, wild Texan yells being heard above the din of trampling hoofs, crashing brush and snorting animals.

At the same instant that the stampede struck the bottom, a fusillade of revolver shots, mingled with Apache war-cries, and yells of agony came from the west.

As the Indians under Rattlesnake sprang from their blankets they were at first dazed by these unaccountable sounds, and for an instant stood in their tracks, weapons in hand. Then, in a body, they sprang for the prisoners, intending to butcher them before a rescue could be attempted. Before the main body, however, came Rattlesnake, with the intention of saving the young girl from such a fate.

The former surprise was nothing to that which now filled the chief and his braves, when they found the sentinel dead and the captives gone.

But no time had they to think or act, for a score of terrified mustangs came crashing through the camp from the north driven by Single Eye and the two rancheros, who poured a rapid fire into the massed, demoralized Apaches, a few of whom, having bounded on the backs of their steeds, were filled with new surprise and terror by a wild stampede of the animals they had themselves corralled to the west. These two came crashing into the opening, and a fearful whirlpool of savage men and maddened mustangs filled the camp.

Benito gave a reassuring pressure of the hand to the horrified father and daughter and then glided downward. Unnoticed in the confusion he sprang along the bank of the river until he reached the spot where the horses of the four had been left secured. Here he did not linger but mounting his own animal and leading the other three he made the best of his way out from the bottom timber to the prairie, and galloping quickly to a point abreast of the Apache camp gave a loud yell.

Instantly he was answered by Old Rocky, who soon appeared on the run, followed by Bob and Green, each with revolvers in hand, and looking over his shoulders, in expectation of seeing any enemy following in their rear.

"Bully boy, pard!" yelled the old scout. "Yer got here jist az yer war wanted! There they come!"

The Apaches on foot, who had struck the opening where the horses were being guarded, but had been driven back by a galling fire from Old Rocky and the boys, now burst out from the bush, charging straight for the spot.

Into their saddles sprang Old Rocky and the boys, and drawing their rifles fired a volley into the midst of the advancing braves, who, as yet, had seen nothing of their comrades under Rattlesnake. Bewildered, and some wounded or dead, the volley forced them back into the timber. Almost at the same instant Single Eye and the two Texan rancheros made their appearance, being driven out from the camp by a movement of Rattlesnake and his men, who had caught mounts from the stampeding mustangs.

Great was the surprise and joy of each party of whites to see the other, and in a moment they were together and preparing to change the camp. As the tail of the mustang herd struck the open plain the seven determined whites dashed home their spurs and sprang down the path.

By this time, however, the Indians from up the river had joined the band of Rattlesnake, and had explained to him the strength and character of the double attack, and the cause of the stampede, as they understood it. Black Bear, by chance, hid his warriors under the very tree in which Colonel Granger and his daughter were secreted, while Rattlesnake drew his hastily mounted and equipped warriors into line at the further side of the open space.

None too soon, either, for just as he formed his band, with the ringing Texan yell the little cavalcade of whites came charging into the camp.

Maddened to desperation by the loss of horses and captives the Apaches sent a cloud of missiles at their advancing foe; but the answering hail of hurtling lead which cut into their ranks caused those who were mounted, with the exception of Rattlesnake, to slip from steed and spring to cover. Rattlesnake bent his eagle-plumed head, and guided his horse beneath the trees, while the reserve under Black Bear sent ball and arrows thick and fast.

Bob and Green spurred recklessly up to the edge of the wood and delivered their fire at short range; but they paid dearly for their temerity. Green received an arrow in the thigh, and Bob's horse fell dead from a lance thrust.

The experienced Texans seeing that it would be impossible to dislodge the Apaches on horseback, at the order of Single Eye retreated toward the opposite side of the opening, intending to dismount and clear the opening by a revolver charge on foot, but as they went a ball from the rifle of Rattlesnake grazed Benito's arm and perforated the brain of his horse, which fell to the earth.

As it happened Jennie Granger was gazing with horror through a space between the screening moss, and saw the fall of Benito and his steed.

Thinking that the young man whom she recognized as her late rescuer, was killed, a cry of agony burst from her lips.

If heard by no other the sound reached the ears of Rattlesnake. He recognized the voice; and understood at once the mystery of the sudden disappearance of the prisoners. With all his thoughts intent upon the lovely Rose of the Frio he bounded up the tree, severed the cords which had bound her safely to her perch, and clambering hastily from branch to branch, without once noticing or thinking of Colonel Granger, finally dropped to the ground with the form of the now senseless young girl flung across his shoulders.

Again in the saddle he brought his quirt hissing about the hams of his mustang and dashed from the dense darkness out into the moonlight, holding the motionless form of the golden-haired girl between him and the deadly tubes which were instantly brought to bear.

Amidst a chorus of yells from the baffled, horrified Texans Rattlesnake flashed across the moonlit opening, and disappeared toward the open prairie.

The wounded Greenway had rolled from his saddle, and Benito, with an agony of desperation that gave him the will, strength and bravery of half a dozen men, sprung from the ground, where he had fallen, to the back of Green's mustang, and twitching the rein from the hand of the boy who still held it he dashed spurs into the sides of the horse and bounded away in pursuit.

Single Eye and Old Rocky were already on Rattlesnake's trail, supposing their friends would all follow; but as the three flashed suddenly out of sight the Apaches hidden in the dark shades delivered a volley that stretched one of the rancheros dead in his tracks. Then with a vengeful cry, and Black Bear at their head they sprung like demons from the dark shades, and in a trice Bob, Green and the remaining Texan were knocked senseless, and bound hand and foot. A few moments later Colonel Granger's retreat was discovered by the searching savages, and a wild yell of exultation showed that he was again a prisoner.

CHAPTER XIV.

INTO THE GULF.

ON, on flew the Apache chief over the plain toward the west, clasping Jennie Granger to his painted breast, her golden tresses flying over his shoulder, and mingling with his own black, flowing hair.

From time to time his face, hideous with war-paint, would be turned toward his pursuers, and exultant yells would break from his lips, but his fair captive heard them not since she still lay swooning in his arms.

And on galloped Single Eye and Old Rocky, their steeds nearly abreast, their rifles clutched, each realizing the slenderness of the chance of retaking the young girl alive, but both determined to follow the trail to the bitter end.

Just in the rear of the old scout came Benito, with set teeth and eyes fixed upon the golden hair, now visible in the gray light of the early morning. Pressing bridle-reins toward the right and lashing his mustang vigorously with his quirt, he sprung past the old scouts and trailed the Apache, not half a rifle-shot behind.

"Hold up!" yelled Single Eye. "Keep yer patience, er ther cuss 'll kill leetle Sunshine!"

"Keep cool, Benito," added Old Rocky.

"We'll run him ter his hole, an' save ther gal some way."

The advice was not wasted, for Benito did not doubt the truth of Single Eye's warning, but immediately slackened his speed. Then all three galloped abreast in the rear of the fast-flying Apache, each horse panting heavily and white foam flying upon all sides, upon prairie grass and flowers.

Mile after mile the chase went on; but at last the black mustang ridden by the Indian began to show signs of flagging under its double load. Sinews of steel could scarcely have stood the fearful strain. A staggering, laboring lope showed to the three avengers that the crisis was near at hand.

How the fearful ride was to end they scarcely dared think. The olive skin of Benito grew a ghastly white as the question came into his mind.

At length the Apache turned back his gaze. It was still defiant; but no yell of exultation now passed his lips.

What was it they heard?

A weird recitation, a monotonous jumble in uniform tone, came plainly to their ears, and they gazed from one to the other in surprise as they lashed their panting steeds onward. They knew that Rattlesnake was chanting his death-song.

What was the danger that menaced the Apache? Why had he given up all hope of life? They knew he would not sing that death-song unless he believed that the end of life was near at hand; and death to him meant death to the captive as well.

The mystery was all too suddenly explained, and each of the pursuing horsemen brought his mustang to a halt with a wrench that extorted a moan of pain from the tortured beast. Straight ahead of the Apache chief was a narrow ribbon of red clay, just discernible below the green grass and black line of the surface, and each man's cheek bleached with horror as he realized the purpose of the Indian chief, who once more turned his face to them, looking like a very demon as he uttered a savage yell. Then he swung his quirt hissing through the air, and pressed the golden-haired maiden closer to his breast, as his mustang, with wild bound and snort, sprung toward what they now knew to be the yawning line of a deep, dry canyon.

"Shoot ther crittur in the hams!"

The words rung out sharp and rapid as the rifle of Single Eye sprung to his shoulder.

A quick report broke on the morning air, followed by two others in rapid succession, as Rattlesnake's mustang was bounding toward the fatal chasm.

At the first shot the left arm of the chief dropped by his side, and Jennie Granger fell, her head downward, her long hair sweeping the prairie grass, ghastly with its death-like pallor, turned toward the Texans, her skirts caught in the sharp horn of the Indian's saddle.

But the black mustang saw the death ahead, and swerved to the left at the cringe of his wounded rider. At the second report he gave a great bound.

The double shock loosened the skirts of the fair captive, and she sunk nearly to the earth.

Another shot, a shriek of terror from the mustang, a death-yell from the Apache, and black horse and red rider shot downward from sight, while Jennie Granger, disengaged by the last mad whirl of the frantic steed, lay on the very verge of the deep barranca—and slowly slipping forward into the hideous gulf.

With the quickness of thought Benito drove home his spurs and loosened his lariat. There was no time or chance for a throw; as his horse sprung forward the girl disappeared from view. He slipped the noose of his lasso over the horn of his saddle, holding the slack in his hand, and as his steed suddenly halted with his forefeet planted deeply in the turf, not a yard from the chasm, the brokaro leaped to the ground and plunged over the edge of the canyon.

At that the horse whirled and endeavored to leave the dangerous locality; but the lariat, looped to the horn of the saddle, and stretched taut over the brink of the bank, seemed to hold him to the spot.

A moment later Single Eye and Old Rocky were there; and while the one seized and held in his iron gripe the prancing steed, the other peered cautiously over the brink, and then waved his sombrero as he uttered a cry of delight.

At some distance below was Benito, his left hand grasping the lariat, his right arm sustaining Jennie Granger, while his feet were braced stiffly against the side of the canyon, at a point where, a mass of earth being detached, appar-

ently by the fall of Rattlesnake and his mustang, a little ledge was left that by chance had caught the girl as she slipped down the almost perpendicular descent. And from below that ledge the side of the canyon was one sheer wall.

The crisis of the danger was past. The two scouts drew in the lariat carefully, and brought the brokaro and his fair burden to the plain.

With jealous care Benito placed the fair girl upon the grass and bathed her head with water from his canteen, while the old scouts peered over the edge, down into the dark, deep barranca at the huddled mass far below, shuddering, meanwhile, at the fearful leap to doom of the mad chief, who chose such a frightful death, as he thought to be shared with her, rather than to relinquish his captive.

Then they stepped back from the canyon, and turned toward Benito.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem, Jericho and jewsharps, but it war a close shave!" Old Rocky spoke at large.

"I rec'ons he'd 'a' bin mashed meat 'bout now ef he hedn't kep' a tight grip on ther lariat," added Single Eye, as he dropped on his knees on the grass and watched the face of the young girl with some solicitude.

Old Rocky, from the other side, took the little wrist of the senseless maiden between his tough thumb and finger, and stared up into the air for a moment as owl-like looking as a first class "saw-bones."

"Reckons yer right, Single Eye. But it's O. K. now. She hev got sum considerable life in her, an' I'll cum out az bloomin' az ever. Reckons we'll shake now, old hoss. Whar in ther name o' Krockitt did yer strike ther trail, an' how did yer kim a-boomin' in on us wi' thet herd o' mustangs jist in time ter save our bacon?"

"Me an' Skiplively haz bin on ther trail sin' ther ole man an' Sunshine war took frum ther ranch. Ther danged 'Taches split, an' part on 'em camped down west, on ther river. I stuck ter ther northern trail, knowin' they'd j'ine afore long; an' az they hed two boys from ther Medina range, what they'd tuck in, I skinned in las' night airly, scopped a few in outhen ther wet, cut ther boys loose, stampeded ther stock, an' levanted down ther river. Rec'ons ye kin study out ther rest ov the story fur yerself. I see little Sunshine's cumin' round ter bizness."

Single Eye was right, for Jennie, with a low moan, opened her blue eyes, in the depths of which still lingered a shadow of horror. In a bewildered, inquiring way she gazed up at the old scouts.

Then, realizing that her head was resting on the arm of some one, her eyes turned upward, filling with a soft pleased expression as she recognized her young preserver, and her lids closed restfully, for a moment.

But a second thought came flashing through her brain, causing her to spring to a sitting position and gaze about her with a wild stare.

Then, with terrible earnestness she exclaimed: "Where is my father?"

"Great heavens!" burst from the lips of Benito.

No other answer came. Of the nine whites but four were here.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FALL OF THE AX—HOME AT LAST.

IT was just about sunrise when Black Bear and his remaining score of warriors, with camp equipage and captives bound upon what mustangs they had been able to catch, stole cut from the bottom timber and made their way as fast as possible toward the old camp from which they had lost horses and captives the night before.

Spies were sent over the prairie in advance, and two well-mounted scouts dashed away upon the trail of Rattlesnake and the three Texans; while the main body in gloomy silence rode steadily on.

The sufferings of the prisoners were already intense, though destined to deepen as the day wore on, and by the time the halt for the night was made one would have thought they had been tortured enough to satisfy even savage hearts.

But the warriors were infuriated by their recent disasters, and cared little so that the prisoners did not lose consciousness. Fearful of some new misfortune they had decided to carry their prisoners no further; but to end their lives by torture that very night. As the night came down they were flitting around through the bottom timber of the Nueces, gathering great armfuls of dry dead wood, which they piled in three huge heaps, within the opening where were bound the four captives.

With arms folded Black Bear stood, giving his

orders. Soon the piles of fuel were deemed sufficient for his use, and at an order fire was applied to each.

Quickly the feeble blaze spread until the three heaps of wood blazed high, throwing a bright light over hush and towering treetop, and brilliantly illuminating the little opening.

Colonel Granger and the Texan ranchero appeared to be more dead than alive, their heads drooping upon their breasts in hopeless despair; but Bob and Green still strove to wear a look of dauntless defiance. They had not altogether lost faith in Benito and Old Rocky, and still hoped to see them come to the rescue.

At an order from the chief half a dozen braves sprung to the young and slender pecan tree, which stood at the northern edge of the opening. They stripped the tree in short order, their scaling-knives flying fast and glittering in the firelight, Bob and Green watching each movement of the red warriors with a dread curiosity.

A stout lariat had been attached to the top of the tree, and at length the six braves, pulling with united strength drew the young elastic tree down to the earth.

Other warriors, at a sign from Black Bear, sprung to the ranchero, cut the thong which bound him to the tree, and bore him to the bent sapling.

The ankles of the doomed man were secured together, the lariat attached to the sapling was made fast to them at the same instant the Apaches all let go.

With a heart-rending shriek, which was echoed by the other captives, the Texan was whisked through the air, as the tree sprung partly back to its place. Then he hung with his head downward, writhing in pain.

A wild yell of exultation quivered up from the Apache horde.

"Great God of justice! What a fearful sight! Are we all to be butchered by such torture, and no help near?"

As Bob spoke he vainly strained at his bonds, while Green answered, in a voice that quavered in spite of himself:

"No use, Bob! The more you pull the worse the green hide cuts. When they come to me I shall try to snatch one of their knives and reach the heart of one or two before I go under."

Again the ranchero uttered a frightful shriek. So full of agony was it that it even roused Colonel Granger from his stupor, and Bob and Green involuntarily closed their eyes. When they looked again a half-dozen arrow shafts were quivering in different parts of the ranchero's body, while his blood, flowing from as many wounds, ran down over his face, and dripped fast from his hanging hair.

With fiendish glee the Apaches danced beneath their victim, gazing upward and drinking in each tremor of pain which racked the form of the dying man.

Then from the south side of the opening there came two sharp reports, and high into the air leaped Black Bear, with a bullet in his brain, while every Apache wheeled and faced thitherward.

It was but a deadly diversion. At the same instant Single Eye and Old Rocky stood by the captives, at the southern side of the little glade, slicing off their bonds. Into the hands of Bob and Green knives were thrust, while Colonel Granger, too weak to stand was thrown backward into a gully. Then the two scouts stepped out into the glow of the firelight, holding a "Colt's army" in each hand, and deliberately, and yet with marvelous celerity, began their work, while Benito rushing around as soon as he had fired his shots from the north, came to their side, and that to stay.

This was no firing in the uncertain moonlight. The fire made the opening light as day, and the slaughtered sentinels had given no warning of the approach of the dreaded foe. It was a surprise and a slaughter.

Flesh and blood could not stand before that furious rain of lead that was to other firing as the tornado is to the gentle zephyr. Those yet unharmed, or but slightly wounded burst away into the bottom timber and fled far from the spot with bated breath. The few scattering arrow shots had done no harm, and almost untouched the Texans were masters of the field.

Single Eye at once turned to the swinging ranchero while Benito darted to the aid of Colonel Granger.

The Texan was past all mortal care; but the white-haired colonel came trembling forward thrilled and eager with a new-born hope, while Benito exclaimed:

"You are safe now, and among friends. See, your enemies are dead, or fugitives, and your

daughter is safe. We have her in concealment but will take you to her and she shall rest in your arms before sunrise."

No happier couple lived then on the broad plains of Texas than Colonel Granger and his daughter, as they met once more face to face, and unwilling to obtrude upon the sacredness of their joy, Single Eye and the rest withdrew a little and left the two for awhile alone in their happiness. When they again joined them they could already see a change for the better in the worn and wasted old man.

The journey down the river and back to the Granger ranch was necessarily slow, but it was devoid of any startling events.

Bob and Green were not at all averse to giving up the projected mustang hunt, for they had met with adventures still more thrilling than any they had thought to find, and with Benito and Old Rocky cheerfully turned on the back trail. As a large share of the stolen stock as well as of the Indians' mustangs, had been gathered up, the procession looked like a small army. With so much recovered the Grangers seemed likely to lose but little through the Apache raid.

What more is there to tell?

Well, but little. The time came for the elements of the little party to separate. Bob and Green turned their faces toward their eastern home, and Single Eye and Old Rocky went out once more to range the free prairies of the grand old commonwealth; but Benito, the Bocarro, handsome, brave and intelligent, lingered to look for something he had lost. If in place he found little Sunshine's heart, who can greatly wonder? Tamed down from his wandering ways he was the man of men in that wild and far-off land where, guided by his advice and skill the colonel lingers yet, his declining years made happy by the love and care of son and daughter.

THE END.

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January 10, 1882.

Vol. IX.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

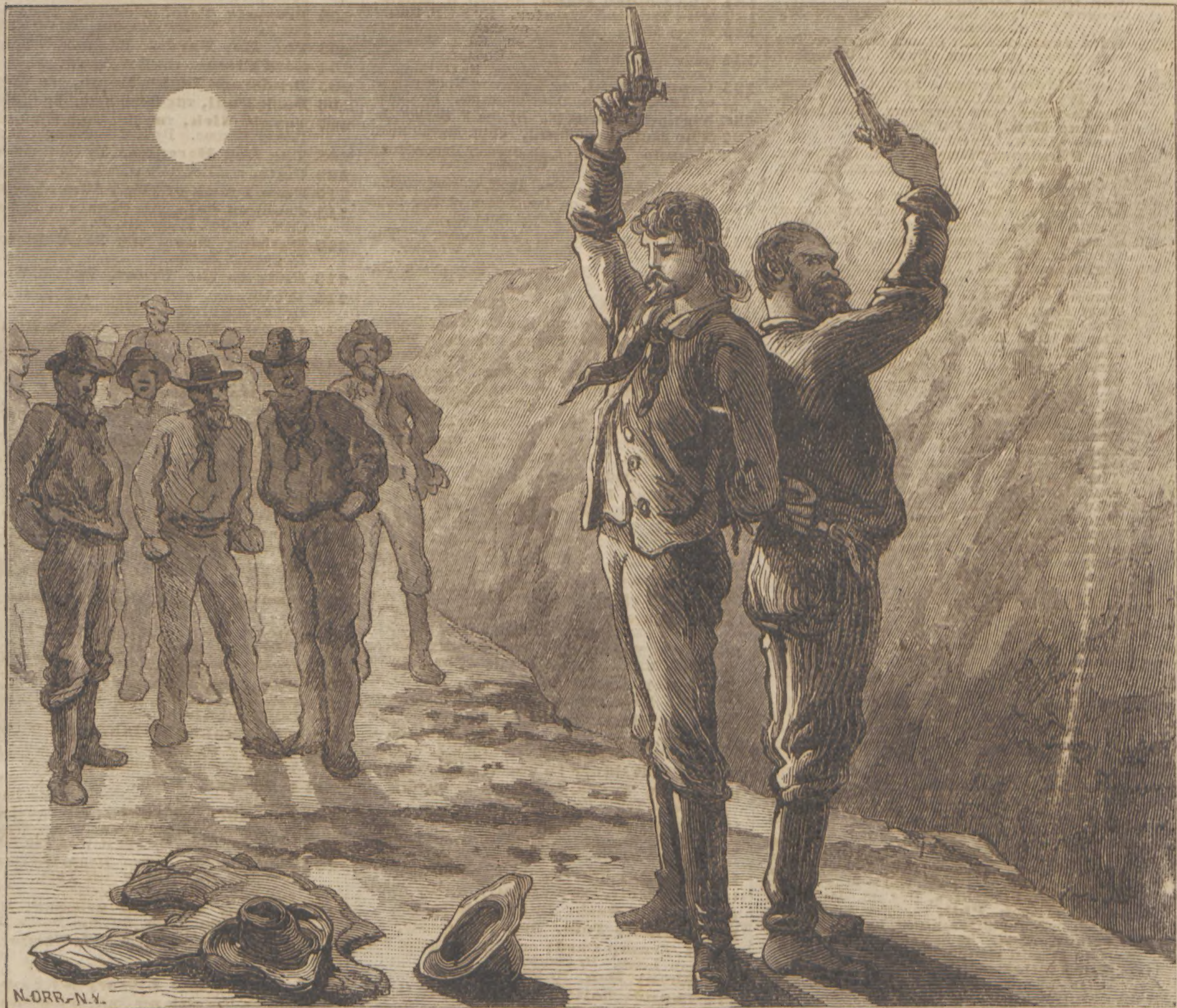
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Or, THE THREE WILD MEN OF EAGLE BAR.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "GOLD DAN," "CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT," "VELVET HAND," ETC., ETC.



NORR-N.Y.

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A ROMANCE OF BUFFALO BILL'S OLD PARD!

WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT; Or, DAGGER DON'S DOUBLE

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "THE DARE DEVIL,"
"THE CRETAN ROVER," "THE PIRATE PRINCE," ETC., ETC.



But two hours passed away and first the explorers of the hills returned and then the others who had gone up the stream, and none had any report to make, for no trace had been discovered in the timber hill-land, and no trail had been seen of where the fugitives had left the water.

"Like as not that han'some, long-haired feller will diskiver more than all of us," said one.

"I reckon, pards, fer he looks like one as sees what kin be seen; does ye hev a idee who he are?" responded and inquired another.

"Nary idee; only I'd like ter see him in a scrimmage, fer it seems to me durned likely he'd call in chips an' pile up cold meat durn lively— By ther Rockies! he are at it now!"

The last words were uttered at suddenly hearing rapid pistol-shots, coming from not far away down the stream, and a few wild yells.

"By Jemima! but that's music we must j'ine in, fer we knows ther tune!" cried another, and throwing themselves upon their mustangs, deep were driven the spurs, and the four Cowboys sped away in the direction of the firing.

A ride of several hundred yards brought them upon a scene that surprised them, for they beheld their strange leader dismounted, and one foot upon a struggling wretch, while he was tying with remarkable ease what appeared to be an Indian warrior, wholly unmindful of his desperate efforts to escape.

Only a few paces distant lay three more hideously painted human beings, who had fallen under his deadly aim.

"Waal, pard stranger, yer hev struck it rich," cried one of the Cowboys.

"Three with the'r toes turned up, an' two in a durned unhealthy grip," said another.

At the sight of Wild Bill the party quickly came to a halt, but he held up his hands, the palms turned toward them in token of peace, and they rode forward, though on their guard.

As they came to a halt, the Robin Red Breast suddenly cried out:

"Jim Hikok! Good God!"

In an instant he had recognized him as one he had met before, and though his Indian rig disguised him beyond the recognition of Wild Bill, he saw that man had some cause to fear him, and the hands of the two dropped upon their revolvers.

There followed several rapid shots, wild yells, the falling of horses, tramp of feet, and away dashed the Red Breast upon the back of one of the mustangs before ridden by a warrior, for his own steed had fallen, and springing forward Wild Bill had caught the maiden in his arms, for he had shot her pony, just the renegade chief was about to dash away with her.

All had happened so suddenly that Hazel Hart hardly knew what had transpired, though she had been a witness of the fracas.

Then she saw three mustangs lying upon the ground in the entrance to the ravine, a warrior dead, another writhing in death-agonies, and heard the clatter of hoofs up the canyon, as the Red Breast sped away, while Wild Bill stood calmly in the midst, and by his side was Red Dove, the beautiful Indian maiden.

Then she looked around for the two white men who had promised to be the lies of Wild Bill, and saw that they had taken advantage of the fight to make themselves scarce.

"The great white chief has saved the Red Dove from a wicked foe of people," said the Indian maiden, in good English, turning her dark, lusty eyes upon Wild Bill, who mentally decided, as he gazed upon the perfect, low form, in its gorgeous, barbaric dress, and the perfect, proud features, bronzed skin, that the report of Red Dove's beauty had not been exaggerated.

"Yes, and I, too, owe him more than my life," said Hazel, advancing to join them, and each maiden, the pale-face and the red-skin, gazed at each other with admiration, though in each heart there was a twinge of jealousy that the other owed, to the splendid-looking man standing near, its preservation.

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